

COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

大きな扉 小さな鍵

今野緒雪

集英社

Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from preschool to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

There exists a door in people's hearts.

If the doors aren't open, they can't communicate heart-to-heart.

A stubborn door could be made of heavy stone.

Or a metal door that hasn't been opened for so long it has rusted over.

But as long as it's a door and not a wall, some day it may eventually be able to open.

A magic phrase may be needed to open a tough door.

Or perhaps it requires a key.

Neither of those would be immediately obvious.

It doesn't even have to be something obtained after a long journey.

It could be right beside it, but hard to find. Such things are possible.

But even supposing you possessed those things, you can't turn the door handle yourself.

All you can do is say the magic words, and put the key in the lock.

If you don't wait until the door is opened from the inside and you're invited in, then the door will remain closed forever.

Key Holder

Sometimes Falling, Sometimes Pulling

Part 1

"Touko wasn't looking to win."

The moment after she said this, Noriko spotted Yumi-sama's lips mouthing the words, "I knew it," even though no sound came out.

She knew it, Touko had run in the election in order to lose.

It wasn't as though Noriko doubted her own intuition, but if Yumi-sama was saying that then it was further proof. Therefore the conclusion was correct. That was how she felt.

Yumi-sama should have been one of the chief revelers in the crowd of students cheering on the announcement of the next student council, but her face was pale.

On the sheet of paper put up on the noticeboard in front of the auditorium, the name "Fukuzawa Yumi" sparkled with the mark of victory – a red flower sticker. But despite this, the owner of that name looked as though she'd just lost the election.

Still, Noriko wasn't in a position to talk either. Her onee-sama had been elected to the next student council alongside Yumi-sama and Yoshino-sama. But Noriko's current expression wasn't that of a petit soeur overjoyed at her onee-sama's success.

"Congratulations, Rosa Chinensis en bouton."

"Do your best, Yumi-sama."

Even while she was talking to Noriko, voices called to Yumi-sama, one after another, and she responded to them with, "Thank-you," and, "I'll try." She didn't know how Yumi-sama saw them, but to Noriko the people surrounding them offering their congratulations and well wishes were like a video recording. To the extent that there was a marked difference between their and her levels of

excitement.

With those sort of phrases flying about, and amidst numerous interruptions, Noriko continued their conversation.

"But why?"

Touko ran in the election in order to lose. They both shared that opinion, so the obvious follow-on question was why did she have to lose the election?

Typically, people would run in an election in order to win. So, why?

"I see. So you don't know either then, Noriko-chan."

"... So you're saying ... "

She was saying that she didn't know either. Seeing Yumi-sama nod, Noriko did an about-face.

"Wait, where are you going?"

Yumi-sama called out to her after she'd taken a step.

"I'm going to ask Touko herself."

If she ran, she should be able to catch up to her soon enough.

"You could come too, if you want."

When Noriko said this, a look of unease passed across Yumi-sama's face.

"... Um."

Until just a little while ago, it felt like Yumi-sama's expression had been a reflection of her own. But now it was different. While Noriko was all fired up, Yumi-sama was smiling quietly and shaking her head.

"I won't go."

"Why not?"

"Why not? I'm not sure, but for now it's fine."

"It's fine?"

What was fine? Noriko didn't understand. She'd said it was fine for now. If she didn't ask now, then just when would she ask Touko?

"But if you want to, you can chase after her, Noriko-chan. I'm just saying that I won't."

"Don't you want to know Touko's real motive, Yumi-sama?"

"How can I put this? It's like, that doesn't really matter anymore – "

Against her better judgment, Noriko was angered by this remark.

"Are you planning on abandoning Touko?"

At times like these, she would rebel without caring that it was against a senior. Noriko herself recognized this was a bad habit, but it was hard for her to restrain herself.

"Is that how it looks?"

"Yes."

Yumi-sama smiled at Noriko's answer and said, "You're honest."

"But actually it's the opposite."

"The opposite?"

"That's right."

Yumi-sama nodded. Just as Noriko was about to ask her what she meant, a single person emerged from the video reel of surrounding students and spoke.

"Sorry for interrupting your conversation."

It was Shimako-san.

"Yumi-san, do you have a minute? Tsutako-san was saying that she wanted to take a photo of all three of us lined up with the bulletin board in the background."

"Ah, okay, I'll be there."

Yumi-sama turned to face Shimako-san and responded cheerfully.

"Also, Mami-san wanted a comment to print in the Lillian Kwaraban."

"Huh? Wasn't the interview with the Lillian Kwaraban supposed to be after school next Tuesday or Wednesday?"

"This is separate to that. She said it was supposed to be an initial reaction, while the excitement was still high."

"Alright. – So you see, Noriko-chan, we'll have to pick this conversation up again some time later."

"... Okay."

It was none other than Noriko's onee-sama, Shimako-san, that was calling her away. There was no way Noriko could stop her.

"You can come too, Noriko."

When Shimako-san called out to her, Noriko instinctively looked at the path lined with ginkgo trees, along which Touko had disappeared.

"Um."

Until just recently, she'd been planning on catching up to Touko.

"I'm – "

But now she was hesitating. Should she chase Touko, or not? Yumi-sama's declaration that she didn't want to chase after Touko had most definitely reined in Noriko's enthusiasm.

"You can go if there's something you have to do, Noriko-chan. We're going back to the Rose Mansion once this is over, so we can meet up there."

"No."

Yumi-sama had probably made this offer so that Noriko could chase after Touko, but Noriko shook her head and accompanied them.

Noriko's gloomy mood lingered. But.

She wasn't abandoning Touko. Yumi-sama had said that, so, for now, that was enough.

In that case, perhaps Touko could be saved.

Rather than letting the blood go to her head and running around recklessly, she wanted to avoid throwing the situation into chaos. Noriko had cooled down enough that she could make that sort of decision.

Part 2

The "Future Roses" photo-shoot was completed in about five minutes, thanks to the photography club member and newspaper club affiliate Takeshima Tsutako-sama. Since the newspaper club only wanted a single comment from each of Shimako-san, Yumi-sama and Yoshino-sama, that was completed quickly too.

"Congratulations, you three. Cheers!"



So, when they returned to the Rose Mansion, all six Yamayurikai members celebrated. Although, since they were minors and at school, they obviously weren't toasting with champagne. It was just tea, like usual, but having been standing around in the open air for a little while, a warm drink was most welcome.

"Whew, I can let it out now, but I was kind of worried deep inside. Remember how Yoshino suddenly went off script during her speech? She let her emotions take over, and kept going until she ran out of time, sort of losing the plot at the end. I was nervous right up until the results were revealed."

Holding her cup, Rosa Foetida let out a large sigh of relief. Hearing this, Yoshino-sama cast a sidelong glance at her onee-sama.

"Oh my, onee-sama. You really didn't show any of that at all."

Noriko thought, "That's true." After the candidate's speeches, Rosa Foetida had kept saying things like, "Good job, Yoshino," and, "You're going to be fine." There had been no indication of her being nervous.

"Well, of course. You were so excited about your speech that I couldn't tell you what I really thought, could I? The smart choice was not to burst your bubble. You were in such a good mood that I couldn't bring you down. Just try and imagine it. For the last three days you'd have been walking around in a foul mood. Even the votes cast for you would run away."

So that was it. As expected of Rosa Foetida. She knew what she had to do for her petit soeur. That probably came from the long time they'd spent with each other.

"Are you done?"

Yoshino-sama aloofly ended the conversation. They'd been expecting a, "Rei-chan you idiot," but it didn't look like that was coming.

(Ah, is that it?)

Since she'd accomplished her major task (victory in the election), Yoshino-sama was in a good mood and it looked like she wasn't about to flare up no matter what was said. Maybe that's what Rosa Foetida's earlier remark about, "I can let it out now," had been based on. If that was the case, then Rosa Foetida

was commensurately incredible.

Speaking of incredible, there was Rosa Chinensis. Even though she forced the three second-years to attend the election information session, she hadn't lifted a finger to help her petit soeur, Yumi-sama, with her election campaign.

At first, Noriko had thought, "What a cold person." However, through observing her behavior, Noriko's impression had gradually changed.

Having made the decision not to help, she could have stayed away entirely, but instead Rosa Chinensis came to the Rose Mansion fairly frequently. As for what she did, she didn't get involved in the election at all – instead she simply read a book by herself. But when Noriko stealthily observed her, she noticed that often twenty minutes would go by without Rosa Chinensis turning a page. So it looked as though she was going to the Rose Mansion because she couldn't keep herself from worrying about how her petit soeur was going with the election.

That Rosa Chinensis was now quietly smiling next to Yumi-sama. Her expression showing that it was because she had faith in her petit soeur. Where did she get that sort of composure from? And Yumi-sama was responding by looking back at her, with an expression saying that she was able to win because her onee-sama was by her side. Even without words, they understood each other.

But in comparison to the dignified and composed Yellow and Red soeurs – Noriko looked at Shimako-san's profile. Just what had she been able to do for Shimako-san?

Naturally, she'd done all sorts of things to help prepare for the election, but Shimako-san was competent enough that she would have been elected even without a petit soeur. Right. Rather than helping out, it felt like she'd been allowed to help. Maybe the way she'd been constantly following her onee-sama around had been a hindrance.

Standing beside these perfect people, her own inexperience was only too obvious.

It was the same with Touko. She was hopeless – she hadn't even been able to guess her friend's feelings. Thoughts like this were bringing Noriko down.

"At any rate, there was a lot of power behind Noriko-chan's support."

Yumi-sama suddenly said.

"Huh?"

"Even the Electoral Committee members were talking about it. The way you kept going, "Good luck, you'll be fine, I believe in you.""

"And then ... "Fight?""

Rosa Chinensis added, and then Yumi-sama stuck a finger in the air.

"That's right, "Fight." All so rapid fire like a machine-gun."

"Huh."

Since she did indeed remember that, the only rebuttal Noriko could offer was to ask, "Is that so?" It didn't feel like it was particularly substantive assistance.

"Ah, I heard about that."

Yoshino-sama stuck her nose in from the side.

"It was just before the candidate speeches, right? I didn't hear you say it, but Hanae-san was talking to some of the others about how honest and straight-forward you were."

Incidentally, the reason Yoshino-sama hadn't witnessed that scene was because the Yellow Rose soeurs were busy with something while Noriko was giving Shimako-san a pep talk.

"Right. It had the power to make anyone witnessing it raise their fist and say, "Yeah, that's the spirit." There's no way Shimako-san wouldn't have been cheered on by hearing that."

"... Is that right?"

Noriko glanced at Shimako-san.

"Of course."

Apparently so, since her response and gentle smile came simultaneously.

Noriko was pleased that it was true. That smile was enough to power her.

That compliment had come at just the right time.

Saying that she was fine as she was.

Despite her happiness, Noriko was also feeling a bit teary-eyed.

Part 3

They were told that the Yellow Rose soeurs were having a celebration party with both the Hasekura and Shimazu families tonight.

"Hehehe, we're having a Chinese banquet."

In a good mood, Yoshino-sama spun around and said, "Isn't that great?" as she walked along.

"There was a celebration dinner when Rei-sama was elected last year too."

Yumi-sama laughed.

"It's academic now, but what were you going to do if you lost? Since you're having a Chinese banquet, you'd have to have made a reservation at the restaurant, right?"

"In that case we'd change the name – it'd be a "Bad luck, Yoshino" or "Cheer Up" party."

Rei-sama interjected from the side.

"I see."

Even if the food was the same, she felt it would taste somewhat different at a celebration compared to a commiseration party. At any rate, it looked like the most important thing to the Yellow Rose soeurs was that they could eat some delicious Chinese food tonight.

As they walked together down the ginkgo tree path, Noriko couldn't help but worry about Yumi-sama.

What was Yumi-sama thinking she should do about Touko?

Had Yumi-sama talked to her onee-sama, Rosa Chinensis, about Touko?

Despite her initial reaction of bewilderment after the election results were revealed, she was currently acting as though nothing had happened.

As though she'd completely forgotten everything about Touko.

Yumi-sama wouldn't abandon Touko. Noriko had faith in those words. Yumi-sama wasn't the sort of person to fob her off with a lie.

So then, why was she leaving Touko alone?

If she took her time, silently watching, Touko would get further and further away. That was how it felt to Noriko.

She didn't understand.

Did Yumi-sama have an idea? If so, Noriko wanted to know

Or was there no basis for it – just some vague instinct that led her to decide she didn't have to act. In that case, was she really willing to bet on that instinct?

"Noriko?"

"Ah."

She was brought back to reality when Shimako-san called her name. She hadn't noticed that they'd arrived at the statue of Maria-sama.

Neither Maria-sama nor Kannon could save Touko, only Yumi-sama.

As she prayed to Maria-sama, Noriko once again felt that Yumi-sama was Touko's onee-sama, regardless of the rosary ceremony.

And yet Yumi-sama was laughing as though nothing had happened. Noriko couldn't understand what she was thinking.

At one point, their eyes met.

At that point, Noriko was probably looking uneasy. In contrast, Yumi-sama favored her with a mysterious smile.

The smile didn't say, "What's wrong?" or, "It's okay," or, "Leave it to me," but instead it encompassed all of those.

Was that due to their one year age difference? Even though Yumi-sama was close by, it felt to Noriko as though she was suddenly far, far away.

In the end, Yumi-sama didn't say a single word about Touko during their entire journey together to M Station.

Slightly Off Target

Part 1

In the end, Yumi didn't say a single word about Touko during their entire journey together to M Station. – Sachiko thought this to herself as she walked.

Immediately after the results were revealed, Yumi had left the crowd to chase something. That something must have been Touko-chan, mustn't it?

Sachiko had been worried. But she hadn't said anything. Yumi would have surely factored the possibility that she would return hurt in to her resolve. That was why Sachiko thought she should stay silent and then welcome her back.

But Yumi had returned soon after. Far too soon for her to have caught up to Touko-chan, had a conversation, and then come back.

She was with Shimako and Noriko-chan.

What on earth had gone on in that brief period while she was away from the bulletin board? When Yumi returned, her expression was markedly different to when she'd pushed her way through the crowd to get out.

Then she never once mentioned Touko-chan's name during their time in the Rose Mansion, or as they walked along the tree lined path on their way home, or in the bus.

(What on earth could have happened ...)

Sachiko once again asked herself the question that had occupied her mind since she disembarked from the train and bid farewell to Shimako. She still hadn't found an answer, despite repeatedly posing the question.

What on earth could have happened? Still wrapped up in this question, she arrived at the front gate to her home.

(And what's going on with me?)

She had no memory of leaving the train station. But, when she checked, her commuter pass was safely in her pocket. Therefore, she must have indeed passed through the ticket gate.

She seemed to remember seeing more advertising banners for new chocolates at the confectionery store in front of the station. But then again, that could have been yesterday. She couldn't say for certain.

Sachiko let out a sigh, then entered her PIN on the intercom keypad and the gates opened.

The lights in the garden and on the gateposts were already switched on. She hadn't even noticed it was getting dark.

She was still thinking about Yumi as she walked along the path to her house.

She couldn't help it. She probably wouldn't be so focused on this one thing if there was something else she had to do, but since she was only placing one foot in front of the other she didn't have to concentrate that hard, which allowed her to easily slip into deep thought. Even so, it would have been strange to focus her mind on not thinking that deeply.

(Maybe I should sing something.)

Sachiko raised her gaze from the ground. Then she noticed something she recognized in the corner of her eye. That gaudy color stood out, even in the dark, and it could only belong to one person.

Sachiko stopped singing.

Part 2

Upon returning home, she found a visitor seated on the living room sofa.

"Welcome home, Sacchan."

"And to you too, welcome back."

She thought it might have been her cousin Suguru-san because of the red car in the car park and, sure enough, it was him.

"I heard."

Sachiko placed her bag on the sofa opposite him then sat down beside it. Usually when she got home from school, she'd call out, "I'm home," to whoever was in the house, then head straight to her room and change out of her school uniform into normal clothes. But since she'd found her cousin sitting alone in the living room, she couldn't just leave him there.

Her mother should be home, so what was she doing? Probably preparing tea somewhere inside.

"That I sprained my ankle skiing?"

"More or less."

Suguru-san raised his left leg slightly and laughed. That was probably the ankle he sprained. She wouldn't have been able to tell if he hadn't said so. No, she wasn't able to tell even though he had said so – it didn't look swollen at all. Although it was probably only because it had healed so well that he was able to drive himself here.

"Even though you warned me not to get hurt. So stupid of me."

"It's unlike you to injure yourself."

He'd been athletic enough to join almost all of the sports clubs back in high-school. And he would have gone to one ski slope or another every year since he

was a child.

"I suppose that's just a measure of my skiing ability."

"Anyone can make a mistake?"

"Hahaha, you're too kind, Sacchan. Anyway, let's set that aside for now."

At any rate, it had taken quite a long time for him to return because of the injury to his leg.

"Although if I hadn't been injured, I would have had to return home right on schedule."

"Really?"

When she had heard he hadn't returned in time for the start of classes, she thought something bad must have happened. She'd been worried that he might have broken a bone, not just sprained an ankle.

"So you're saying you didn't want to come back, Suguru-san?"

Sachiko's mother joined in the conversation, carrying a tea tray.

"Welcome home, Sachiko-san."

"I've just arrived home, mother. So, why didn't you want to come home?"

"You took a liking to the owner of the bed and breakfast, didn't you?"

Her mother placed a tea cup in front of Suguru-san. Thinking it was an overly large teacup, Sachiko realized it was a matcha cup and, sure enough, it had green tea inside. Her mother had probably heard Sachiko's voice and realized her daughter had returned home while she was preparing the tea, as there were three tea cups. One for Sachiko too.

"The bed and breakfast? Weren't you staying at a hotel?"

"At first I was staying at a hotel, but I went to a bed and breakfast after the injury."

"Ah, you moved because you were staying for longer."

But that didn't fit with his earlier statement. If he'd returned home when originally planned, he wouldn't have taken a liking to the owner of the bed and

breakfast. He only moved from the hotel to the bed and breakfast after deciding to stay for longer.

"No doubt you injured yourself saving some woman you didn't know, who turned out to own a bed and breakfast. She was then so impressed by your manliness that she offered to let you stay until you were healed."

"It's like you were there, oba-sama."

Suguru-san rested his chin on his interlaced fingers and smiled. Acting like he was hearing gossip about somebody else.

"Your mother told me all about it. Of course, she told me about the delicious souvenirs you brought back too. Now then, shall we try them?"

Sachiko's mother smiled, placing a small box that was the epitome of a "Hotel Souvenir" on the side of the table. That must have been the gift from Suguru-san, as the packaging had a picture of people skiing, as well as the name of the resort followed by "Manjuu." It could be called "simple" if one were being kind, or "cliched" if not.

"She told you?"

"She said they went well with matcha tea."

As she said this, Sachiko's mother opened the box and placed one of the individually wrapped manjuu buns in front of Sachiko.

"Wait. I have to visit the restroom."

Sachiko stood up. Remaining in her school uniform was one thing, but she wouldn't feel right eating or drinking anything without washing her hands and rinsing her mouth.

"I'll go too."

She walked off and Suguru-san followed.

"They're both such good children."

Sachiko heard her mother say, and the tone she used was like she was praising some kindergarteners.

Part 3

After Sachiko had washed her hands with soap and rinsed her mouth with mouthwash, Suguru-san addressed her quietly from behind.

"Did anything happen while I was away?"

"Anything? It was only a sprain, so surely you were able to read the newspaper by yourself?"

After wiping her hands and mouth on a towel she turned around, and Suguru-san was standing there with a forced smile.

"Do you think I'd be asking you about local news?"

"Then what?"

"Now you're teasing me. I want to hear about Yumi-chan and Touko."

"Yumi and Touko-chan?"

Sachiko hadn't meant to tease him. Initially, she'd had no idea what he was inquiring about. But now she was more surprised by the fact that she hadn't been all that surprised when those two names had been mentioned. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had had a sneaking suspicion.

"Why are you interested in those two, Suguru-san?"

Perhaps Touko-chan had told him about what transpired between them at last year's Christmas Eve party. Or maybe there was something about that pair he was interested in, and this was his chance to find out. There was also the possibility that it was just a passing interest.

Suguru-san opened up surprisingly easily.

"Last December, Touko had a fight with her parents and ran away from home. Although she was only gone for half a day, so it was no big deal."

"... That's news to me."

Sachiko muttered, and Suguru-san agreed, "So it seems."

"They didn't want it to turn into a major drama, so I did my best to keep it under wraps."

"So why are you telling me now?"

They didn't want it to be a major drama. Therefore he had been keeping it quiet. That was all fine and well. The Ogasawaras and the Matsudairas, Touko-chan's family, were relatives but they weren't directly blood related. Sachiko understood that there were things they would keep from her. But in that case, she thought Suguru-san should have kept his silence forever.

"Well, it's more than a month old, and it seems like Touko's calmed down since then. There's a fair few people that know about it already, so I'm sure there's rumors about it spreading throughout the family anyway. It seems like trying to keep it a secret would be pointless. But that doesn't mean I'm going around announcing it publicly. It's just that you asked me why I was interested."

"I see."

Sachiko poured a small amount of mouth wash into a cup then diluted it with water. Offering this to Suguru-san, she asked: "So how is Touko-chan running away from home related to Yumi?"

Sachiko had asked him why he was interested in those two. Answering that by just telling her about Touko-chan running away from home seemed somewhat insufficient.

"Well."

Suguru-san took the cup, rinsed his mouth rather perfunctorily and continued.

"Touko was found at Yumi-chan's house."

"At Yumi's house?"

That was also news to her. Of course, if she was just hearing about Touko-chan running away from home for the first time, then obviously she shouldn't remember any other conversations related to it either. Having said that, it was harder to accept since it involved her own petit soeur, Yumi.

"It wasn't like she ran away to Yumi-chan's house. From what I heard, she was

walking through their neighborhood and ran into Yumi-chan's brother, Yuuki."

Even so, the fact that Touko-chan was in Yumi's neighborhood surely meant that in some way she was putting her trust in Yumi.

"When did this happen?"

Making up her mind, Sachiko asked.

"I told you, it was in December ... "

"I know that. What I want to know is whether it was before or after Christmas."

"In that case, it was before."

Suguru-san answered clearly.

"From memory, I think it was during the post-exam break."

"... I see."

Which meant it was before Yumi offered Touko-chan her rosary, and was rejected.

At the time, when she heard Yumi had made the offer she felt it was a bit sudden – but if something like this had already occurred between them then Yumi's actions were probably just the natural flow of events and not abrupt at all.

Even as late as the post-exam break, Touko-chan had obviously thought she could rely on Yumi. In that case, why had she rejected the soeur proposal?

"Yumi-chan seemed to be worried about Touko."

Sachiko's thoughts were disrupted by her cousin's voice. Even as she was thinking, "Wait a minute, I'm considering this," she made the content-free response, "I see."

"Given your fixation with the timing of this, I take it something happened between Touko and Yumi-chan at Christmas. And Touko didn't attend your women-only New Year's party either."

"But that was for Yamayurikai members – "

"I know you sent her an invitation. And that Touko spent that entire day at home, not going anywhere. It was a private gathering, so there would have been no obligation for her to attend. But, it is a bit concerning."

"That's true."

Sachiko agreed with him.

"You're her cousin, Suguru-san. It's only natural you'd be worried about your family."

"Something like that."

"Well, anyway."

To think that something like that had happened between Yumi and Touko-chan, and she hadn't been aware of it. It wasn't so much of a shock as a complete surprise.

"Don't blame Yumi-chan."

"I don't."

The reason Yumi hadn't told her was probably because she'd decided it wasn't the right time to discuss it. She may have had been concerned about Touko-chan's privacy, since it involved her running away from home. No, Yumi was probably determined to resolve things with Touko-chan without relying on anyone else.

This was undoubtedly a "soeur" problem for Yumi and Touko-chan – although Sachiko honestly wasn't sure as to whether or not they'd actually become soeurs. Even though she was Yumi's onee-sama, this was territory that she couldn't venture into.

In that regard, her cousin was in the same spot.

"I still haven't answered your initial question."

Therefore, she thought it was okay to tell Suguru-san.

"My initial question?"

"You asked me if anything happened while you were away, didn't you?"

"Ah."

Suguru-san said, "That's right," as though he'd only just remembered. Although Sachiko didn't know if that was the truth. He may have just pretended to forget.

"Touko-chan ran in the student council election, and lost."

"Huh."

"I don't know why she did that."

Sachiko said, anticipating the question. There had to be a reason behind such a reckless action. But she had absolutely no idea what it was.

"Unbelievable."

Suguru-san looked down, using his hand to stifle a groan. A muted, "To treat Yumi-chan like that," leaked out between his fingers.

"Suguru-san. Do you like Yumi?"

This thought had suddenly crossed her mind. Suguru-san's face froze for a moment before he smiled at Sachiko.

"What a strange thing to say. I – "

"I suppose so. Forgive me."

Sachiko immediately retracted her remark. Her former fiance had previously confessed to her that he was homosexual. If he were to admit that he liked Yumi, it would raise a contradiction.

However, just now, Suguru-san had interpreted "like" as romantic interest. That seemed like a mistake on his part.

Suguru-san soon realized this too.

"... I see. I should have just smiled and said, "Yumi-chan's a good girl, so of course I love her.""

"Something like that."

"But I don't want you to misunderstand."

"In the past I wouldn't have understood. But, recently, I feel like I'm starting to understand all sorts of things. You don't have to intentionally simplify your

explanation to me."

The reason he didn't consider Sachiko a romantic interest wasn't because she was female. It was an issue beyond gender. So even if Sachiko had been born a male, he wouldn't have seen her in that light.

But explaining that to a still immature cousin would be quite a challenge, so at the time he'd simplified things by saying he was gay, to force her to accept it. Probably.

"In pure quantity terms, I like you more than I like Yumi-chan."

Hearing this, Sachiko understood.

"But it's a different kind of 'like.'"

"Right. You always were the smart one, Sacchan."

"Compared to whom?"

Suguru-san was quiet for a moment before answering smoothly.

"Silence is golden, don't they say?"

Which meant it was probably someone she knew too. So that was it – by saying, "Silence is golden," he was implying that, for Sachiko, "Not asking is golden."

"But it's true that I like guys."

"You mean, you like them too."

"I give up."

"Bulls-eye?"

The day was coming when she would be able to laugh and joke about such matters with Suguru-san. Such a thing had seemed unimaginable to her when she was fifteen.

"I suppose we should get back soon. If we spend too much time locked up in the washroom, even your mother will start to have strange thoughts."

Suguru-san was starting to leave, but Sachiko grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back.

"Hold on, you forgot to wash your hands."

Part 4

"I know Sachiko always takes her time, thoroughly washing her hands and rinsing her mouth, and it looks like you're the same, Suguru-san. I should have expected that, since you're cousins. You're both equally fastidious."

Hearing Sachiko's mother's comment, they both looked at each other and smiled.

"Now, let's eat."

Being urged to hurry, Sachiko sat down on the sofa.

"I suppose. You went to the effort of making us tea, we shouldn't let it go cold."

Although it was matcha, so it wasn't meant to be served piping hot, but it would still taste worse cold. It was fundamentally different to iced green tea.

"Ah, hold on."

Sachiko's mother stopped her just as she was about to take a sip from the teacup.

"What is it?"

"You should start by eating the manjuu. Right?"

The last, "Right?" was directed at Suguru-san. The gift giver simply smiled and said, "Well, we could try it your way."

"We're sitting on a sofa, eating manjuu that's a souvenir from a ski resort, and you're telling me there's a proper etiquette to it?"

It wasn't like it was the full-blown tea ceremony. If it were, they'd first of all have to do something about the matcha that had been sitting on the table for over five minutes.

"Never mind that. Come on, peel off the cellophane. Then on the count of

three, take a bite."

" ... ?"

Even though she thought it was a strange procedure, Sachiko followed her mother's instructions. She cut the manjuu bun in two and placed one half in her mouth. At that point she was innocent. She hadn't been told anything in advance, so she held no preconceptions.

"What do you think?"

Suguru-san asked them, as they were chewing. He was a coward – he'd unwrapped his manjuu bun but hadn't taken a bite.

" _ "

"Give me your honest opinion."

Sachiko lightly glared at Suguru-san when he asked a second time.

"If you want my honest opinion."

"Please. Don't hold back."

In that case – Sachiko made up her mind.

"This confectionery, well, it's – "

Sachiko started to speak, but then her mother blurted out, "It's disgusting!"

"Um, mother, shouldn't you consider your words a little more ... such as, "It's not overly tasty." Or, "It's not to my taste.""

Having said that, no matter how they sugar-coated it, something disgusting was still disgusting.

The outside was dry and crumbling while the red bean paste was overpoweringly sweet. It would have been better if that was all, but it also had a spicy aroma, so one bite was enough to make her lose her appetite.

"It's alright, Sacchan. I sampled all the sweets they had at the gift shop and bought the most disgusting one as a souvenir."

"Why would you do such a thing?"

Was he really such an idiot?

"Because all the people around me have discriminating palettes. How would I get a gift that they all found truly delicious?"

"It wouldn't have to be truly delicious."

That was the nature of a travel souvenir. It was brought back as evidence of where you'd been.

"Ahh, that's boring."

"I know one thing. It's become the talk of the family."

That Suguru-san the gourmand had brought back some truly awful sweets from his ski trip. Of course it would become a rumor. Even Sachiko's mother had apparently heard the rumor and had been ready and waiting for Suguru-san's visit.

Even though she'd just said it was disgusting, she was still taking bites out of the remaining half of her manjuu bun and washing it down with matcha tea.

"You too Sachiko-san, have another bite."

"No."

She was not currently overcome with hunger. She didn't want to eat something that she knew was awful. She didn't want to join her mother out of some vague sense of camaraderie.

"You think I'm trying to trick you. Have it with the tea."

"... Huh?"

Now that she'd mentioned it, Sachiko remembered. The green tea. She'd been forbidden from drinking it before eating the manjuu bun, but it looks like that ban had now been lifted. Not having a choice, but still thinking she was being tricked, Sachiko took a sip of tea and then a bite of the manjuu bun.

And then.

"Oh my."

"Right?"

It definitely felt as though the flavor had changed. The overblown sweetness was milder, and what she had thought was a spicy aroma was somehow lessened

and now had a subtle hint of flowers. Even though the aroma had previously seemed synthetic, now it seemed like the sweet had traces of caraway and dill in it. Was it really the same thing as before?

"Was this your idea, Suguru-san? Did you put that much thought into it?"

"No. I just bought something truly awful."

Suguru-san sipped his tea, looking unconcerned.

"Then ... "

"It was Mrs Matsudaira's breakthrough."

"Matsudaira ... ah, Touko-chan's mother?"

Sachiko remembered the last time they'd met, a couple of years ago. Mrs Matsudaira was an adorable woman – slightly plump but gentle, and still with the air of a sheltered lady despite being married.



"When I visited the Matsudaira's, aunty was making some green tea. We decided to eat them then, since it seemed like a good time. I knew they were awful so I held back, but Mrs Matsudaira told me they were delicious. It didn't seem like she was faking it."

"Since she had it with green tea from the start."

"She'd been bedridden for a bit towards the end of the year, so at first I thought that might have affected her tastebuds. But since she was so insistent, I reluctantly tried one and discovered they were surprisingly good."

"Now that you mention it, I haven't seen her for a while. So she's been ill then."

There were a lot of things being learned for the first time today.

"But I heard she made it to the sports carnival and the school festival."

Her mother asked, "Didn't you see her?" and Sachiko shook her head. The sports carnival and the school festival were both so hectic that she wouldn't have noticed an acquaintance in the crowd. Although she probably would have noticed if they'd been borrowed for a race, like a certain somebody.

"She was a bit blue because she was worrying about all sorts of things – like the family hospital, and her daughter, who's at a difficult age. But, from what I hear, it wasn't anything too bad."

Her concerns about her daughter were probably related to Touko-chan running away from home. However.

"What about the hospital?"

The Matsudaira hospital mentioned would probably be the one on the outskirts of Tokyo, where Sachiko's grandmother had spent her last days.

"Mr Matsudaira ... uh, Touko's father, didn't become a doctor. And her grandfather's getting on in years. So it seems like a good time to consider the future of the hospital, don't you think?"

Suguru-san answered, with an, "I don't really know the whole story," vibe. Even though he probably knew more than he let on, he was good at making an exit for himself.

"Oh my, your mother was telling me that things were proceeding smoothly at the hospital."

Sachiko's mother murmured.

"Well, there was some things put in motion. But Touko was completely against it, so despite things proceeding smoothly it's been put on hold for now."

Suguru-san said.

When her mother left to make another pot of tea, Sachiko asked Suguru-san: "Could that have been why Touko-chan ran away from home ... "

She'd missed the chance to ask earlier, but the timing of those events coincided almost perfectly.

"Correct."

Suguru-san then added, "That was the direct cause." Which meant that the circumstances must have actually been slightly more complicated than that.

"They were talking about what to do with the hospital?"

"To put it bluntly."

"But it's not as though Touko-chan's grandfather or either of her parents are forcing her to become a doctor, right?"

"I would say not."

"Then what does it matter what their daughter thinks? Don't you think both Mr and Mrs Matsudaira are too soft on Touko-chan? That's why she's so selfish."

As she said this, Sachiko felt her main point was slipping away. She'd unknowingly been carried away by her emotions. She didn't want to say these things. But she couldn't stop herself.

"The Matsudairas may be soft on her, but Touko isn't all that selfish."

Suguru-san's comment finally put the brakes on Sachiko's mouth.

"... You're right. I misspoke."

Yumi's offer of soeurship had been rejected. Her irritation at not having a clear answer as to why had unconsciously been directed towards Touko-chan.

Probably.

Sachiko understood it well. While Touko-chan may look selfish, or give that impression, like Suguru-san said she wasn't actually all that selfish. Even though she could sometimes act spoiled, one must always take into account the time and the circumstances. When the time came to reign it in, she reigned it in. Nothing she did was truly unreasonable.

But knowing that had probably made Sachiko even more irritated. Since she'd rejected Yumi, there must have been some circumstances that stopped her, or made her stop. That was the only way that Sachiko could understand it.

"Hey, Sacchan, do you remember anything from when Touko was born?"

Suguru-san asked brightly. He was probably trying to soften her prickly mood.

"No?"

Sachiko forced out a smile.

"I suppose not. You were only two, and she was a distant relative."

"Since you said that, does that mean you do remember?"

"Well, I was already three. Aunt Matsudaira and Touko came straight to our place from the hospital, and they stayed for about a month. I think she was a bit worried about raising a baby – well, I suppose everyone is the first time. So she was probably relying on the senior mothers – my mother and grandmother – to help. I was so young that I thought Touko was really my little sister. So I was telling everyone I met, "I've got a new baby sister." I was over the moon."

"I see. And?"

Sachiko asked, and Suguru-san responded with, "Oh, nothing." It looked like he was just trying to change the topic, after all.

"You were affectionate towards Sachiko too, Suguru-san."

Her mother said, returning from the kitchen.

"Even though you were a baby yourself, you used to say, "Baby, baby." And pat her and kiss her."

"I don't remember that."

Suguru-san scratched his head.

"I'm sure that's why Sachiko fell in love with you."

"Let's not talk about the past."

Sachiko glanced at her mother, who was smiling and placing the teacups on the table. She didn't want to revisit the story of how she said, "I want to be Suguru-san's bride," when she was in kindergarten.

It was tough because adults always delighted in dragging things out into the light things that children had done, but didn't remember.

"Alright, alright."

Hearing Sachiko's mother say this as she distributed another round of tea cups and manjuu buns, the two younger people's eyes met and they grinned.

"Even when you were young, you liked girls, Suguru-san."

– Her mother was only slightly off-kilter.

Arriving With a Proposal

Part 1

After school on Monday.

It was surprisingly fast, but it came at last.

"Gokigenyou. Pardon my intrusion."

"Coming."

Unfortunately, Noriko-chan was still busy preparing tea, so Yoshino went to the first-floor to welcome their visitor and when she saw who it was she made a somewhat stupid sound.

"Wha?"

The person who'd shown up on the Rose Mansion doorstep holding a manilla folder filled with some documents was her classmate, Yamaguchi Mami-san.

"It's the newspaper club."

Yoshino already knew that. However.

"I thought you said we were going to do the student council interview tomorrow."

This morning, when they met. Right after, "Gokigenyou." She'd said, "We're going to do the interviews for the Lillian Kavaraban tomorrow after school, so can you keep that free?" Yoshino had been with her classmate Yumi-san, and they'd both heard it. There was no mistaking it.

"I did say that."

For reasons Yoshino couldn't understand, Mami-san puffed her chest out.

"Then what brings you to the Rose Mansion today?"

Yoshino had a bad feeling about this. This series of events reminded her of a certain someone who had been in the newspaper club before Mami-san became editor-in-chief.

"Now that the election's over, I thought it was time we started planning for the Valentine's Day event."

See, there it was.

"I haven't heard anything about that."

Although she had actually heard about it indirectly via Sachiko-sama. But that was an inconvenient fact so she chose to ignore it.

"Well of course. I haven't spoken directly with you about it, Yoshino-san."

"Why haven't you?"

Even though they'd been studying in the same classroom day after day after day after day. It wasn't as though their classroom was split into separate cliques, with the opposing groups never having a chance to speak to each other. It was quite the opposite, with Mami-san being in the top ten people Yoshino got along with in her class, so it seemed like they should have discussed it.

But despite all that; Oh yes, but despite all that; Why did she not say? (a Haiku).

"How can I put this ... for insurance?"

Mami-san stepped into the Rose Mansion and closed the door. She'd obviously decided she had to do this herself since Yoshino wasn't exactly inviting her in. It was currently late January. It went without saying that it was cold outside.

"What do you mean by that?"

Even so, instead of leading her to the room on the second-floor, Yoshino stepped in front of her and blocked her path. As expected, Mami-san looked stunned.

In truth, Yoshino had nothing against Mami-san personally. However, she did

have a lot against the newspaper club.

But it wasn't like she wanted to get revenge for each and every incident that sprang to mind. For one thing, she didn't have the time, nor was she that stubborn. In the past, she hadn't even had the time to take notice of each and every one of them.

Basically, Yoshino had been in a bad mood recently. And Mami-san was just the unlucky victim of that, this time around.

How sad. Like, if she'd just shown up tomorrow, then Yoshino may have gone to meet her cheerfully – although that may only have lasted as long as the greeting.

"Well, by insurance, I mean like ... "

Mami-san said.

"Remember last year, the boutons weren't very cooperative when my onee-sama proposed the Valentine's event."

"Sure, I remember that."

Yoshino agreed, thinking back to last year.

"So I thought about what might happen if this year's boutons had the same reaction, and I started coming up with countermeasures ... pardon me."

Slipping past Yoshino, Mami-san reached the staircase.

"Countermeasures?"

Yoshino asked, chasing after Mami-san.

"Repeating the events of last year would be a waste of time, and kind of boring, don't you think? Although from our point of view, I can't think of a single reason not to be excited about such a dream-like plan."

Mami-san climbed the creaky staircase.

"Is everybody here?"

"We are, but."

Yoshino answered, and it was only when she reached the second floor that she

finally realized.

"Ah! Today we have both Sachiko-sama and Rei-chan here as well. Is that your doing!?"

Mami-san grinned in response to this accusation.

"When did you become so underhanded, Mami-san? You're like Tsukiyama Minako-sama the second."

"Whatever could you mean? What's wrong with being like your onee-sama? First of all, I wouldn't have to do this if you'd just cooperate with the newspaper club. Since you'll be going along with the plan anyway, you should just happily get on board."

The question was, where did she get the confidence to make statements like, "You'll be going along with it anyway," and, "get on board?" Well, sure, last year the previous Roses had pressured the boutons, so they had no choice but to cooperate.

But Yoshino thought that it wouldn't be like that this year. Even if Yumi-san followed her onee-sama's order to participate, Shimako-san wasn't the type of person to use her authority over her petit soeur and Yoshino herself certainly wasn't afraid of Rei-chan. Even with the help of the current Roses, it shouldn't go the way the newspaper club was anticipating.

After climbing the stairs, Mami-san stopped and said to Yoshino, "After you."

"?"

"Surely it would be a complete loss of face for you if the visitor entered before the person sent to greet them."

"I never would have expected such consideration from you."

But, since she'd gone to the effort, Yoshino decided to enter the room first.

"Mami-san from the newspaper club has arrived."

Yoshino announced, opening the door.

"Oh, hi there."

"Do come in."

Sachiko-sama and Rei-chan acted as though their visitor was completely unexpected as they welcomed her.

(Even though they're only here today because they knew she was coming.) In her mind, Yoshino complained about those sly old foxes. It was annoying how the two third-years had recently come to resemble their predecessors.

"Oh my, what's wrong, Yoshino-chan? Offer Mami-san a seat."

Wearing the guise of a princess, "sly old fox #1" acted unconcerned as she spoke.

"Well, fine. Come in, Mami-san, have a seat here."

If they were going to be foxes, she'd have to be a wolf.

"Thank-you kindly."

After Mami-san was seated, "sly old fox #2" called out to Noriko-chan.

"Another cup of tea, too."

If #1 was the princess, then #2 would be the bumbling prince. Well, the princess was a metaphor, she didn't actually take that form so there was no need to cast everyone into the play.

Yoshino headed over to the sink to help Noriko-chan, but Yumi-san got there first and sidled over to Yoshino and whispered: "Why's Mami-san here?"

"Planning for Valentine's."

Was all Yoshino had to say.

"Ahhh – "

Yumi-san loudly exclaimed. They'd discussed it once prior to the election, but Mami-san's arrival was just too reminiscent of Minako-sama last year.

"Okay? We mustn't lose, Yumi-san."

Yoshino kept her voice low as she gripped Yumi-san's hand tightly.

"Uh, okay ... lose to who?"

The newspaper club ... or, their onee-samas? Either? Or both?

"To anyone. At any rate, to yourself. You mustn't lose to yourself. As long as

you fight, you'll win. Noriko-chan will be fine too."

Glancing over, Noriko-chan had finished adding the black tea leaves to the cup, and looked perplexed.

"I'm sorry, I don't really understand what you're saying."

"Basically, you don't have to do what the newspaper club and your onee-sama says."

Yoshino added water to the electric kettle and plugged it into the outlet.

"Ah."

"That's why ... you'll be fine. Since you don't seem like you'll get discouraged easily."

Since she always spoke her mind, even to older students – and it was impossible to imagine Shimako-san looking scary and ordering her to do something in the first place.

As she added the hot water to the tea cup, Yoshino and Shimako-san's eyes met.

"What is it?"

Shimako-san's smile was as warm as ever. Rather than "What" it felt like "Wha~t."

"No, nothing."

It felt a bit sad to lump this angel in with the "sly old foxes" Sachiko-sama and Rei-chan. But, take care. Depending on which way she went, she could be either an enemy or an ally.

Shimako-san was a "Rose."

Yoshino had to be careful, to see which way Shimako-san lent.

Part 2

The first thing she had to determine was whether this plan, or at least the direction, had already been agreed upon behind-the-scenes by the two third-years and the newspaper club.

Why would she think that? First of all, it was only this year that Sachiko-sama had told them that the newspaper club were sounding her out about it towards the end of last year, which certainly smelled fishy.

Well, maybe Sachiko-sama could be given the benefit of the doubt and that really was just absentmindedness on her part. But since Mami-san had known that everyone would be here before she arrived (or maybe she'd chosen today because she'd heard a rumor that everyone was at the Rose Mansion) and hadn't informed the boutons beforehand, this was less like a surprise attack and more like a foul play.

Especially since the presence of Rei-chan, on a day when they didn't have a meeting scheduled, after she'd made her "I'm studying so I won't be attending often" announcement, was the same as a confession.

Ah, humans, why did they feel the need to push things they were forced into on to the younger generation? Even as she lamented this, there was no way Yoshino would break this chain when it was her turn to pass it on. Even if she detested it immensely when it was her turn, she enjoyed watching it once the storm had passed over her. That was the sort of girl Shimazu Yoshino was.

So then, the question became, what was Shimako-san's position? After they sat down Yoshino was able to observe Shimako-san indirectly, and it looked as though she didn't support the sly old foxes, aka the third-year Roses, in their plan.

Come to think of it, Shimako-san had been kept in the dark alongside Yoshino and Yumi-san when they'd decided on the cast for the school festival play. It

must be because they were in different grades. It didn't seem likely that the third-years would have been worried about Shimako-san leaking some information to the boutons. Having said that, Yoshino thought it was better for Shimako-san's peace-of-mind that she hadn't been told.

As she distributed the papers she'd brought, Mami-san spoke.

"Well then, I present you with our proposal for this year's Valentine's Day event."

Wha – .

She was speaking like it was already decided that the Yamayurikai would be co-operating with the newspaper club.

Yoshino was all for shortening meetings, but wasn't this going too far as a starting point? The correct behavior when asking something of someone was to start by bowing your head and saying, "Won't you please co-operate?" Even Tsukiyama Minako-sama, who was prone to flights of eccentricity, had done this last year. Well, even if Mami-san did bow her head, Yoshino wasn't about to say, "Okay." Now then, at what point would Mami-san get punished for this?

"Ah, right. It might be a bit late mentioning it now, but."

Mami-san said, noticing Yoshino's angry glare.

"We're holding an event on Valentine's Day again this year, and the co-operation of the Yamayurikai ... has already been approved by Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida."

"What!?"

Even without the preface of, "It's a little late mentioning it now," Yoshino knew that the two parties were conspiring. But, they'd already approved it?

"Well, there was no reason to refuse, was there?"

Sachiko-sama looked confused as she asked, as though to say, "What's so surprising?"

"But even so."

Yoshino dug in. She hadn't taken a look at the proposal so she didn't know

exactly what plan Mami-san had in mind, but, going by last year, the ones that had to co-operate the most were the boutons. But the "comfortably retired" people had approved the plan even before hearing the opinion of those who would have to do most of the work. What the heck was going on?

"You too, Yumi-san. Don't be silent, say something."

Yoshino spurred Yumi on. In this situation, the boutons had to stick together steadfastly to oppose the tyranny of their onee-samas.

But, that Yumi-san.

"... Um, what's this year's event?"

"Wh – hey!"

Sure, she'd been told to say something, but she didn't have to play dumb like that.

"Huh?"

No, that wasn't it. Yumi-san was being serious. She wasn't playing for laughs, she was actually interested in what Mami-san was proposing. But in that case, rather than looking at Yoshino with a puzzled expression, she could have looked at the document she held tightly in her hand ... unbelievable.

"Hang on, Yumi-san. Aren't you angry about the onee-samas agreeing to this on their own?"

Oh Fukuzawa Yumi, have you been ensnared by the sly old foxes?

"That does annoy me a little."

"Only a little?"

The baby fox said, "Yeah."

"But, you know, is being angry about that a reason to reject the plan entirely? Because those are two separate matters, right?"

Wait, don't say any more.

"I'm sure I'll have all sorts of concerns about the Valentine's event itself. But even so, I'm of the same opinion as my onee-sama – the conclusion I came to was that there's no reason to refuse."

Yumi-san, Yumi-san, Yumi-san. Even though you were told to be quiet. Well, that was only within Yoshino's mind, so there's no way she could have heard it.

"Last year, Mizuno Youko-sama's dream was realized. I want to see that dream come true again."

The only sound in the deathly silent room was the whistling coming from the kettle.

That's right, how could she forget? Yoshino hung her head in shame.

Yumi-san idolized Youko-sama. Hadn't she said this clearly during her candidate's speech?

"So why not listen to what Mami-san has to say before deciding whether or not to co-operate?"

It was a sound argument. Too sound – Yoshino had no retort.

Looking back, Yoshino had been such an idiot when she'd told Yumi-san, "Don't lose to yourself," a couple of minutes ago. Yumi-san had stated her opinion brilliantly. She hadn't lost at all. Yoshino was the one who appeared to have lost.

"Why are you opposed to it, Yoshino-san?"

Shimako-san asked, looking straight into Yoshino's eyes. So then, Shimako-san was in favor of it too. Well, that was probably to be expected.

"... Because it's an order from above."

Ooh, it was such an unpersuasive reason that she hated having to say it. It was most likely pointless arguing it, especially since Yumi-san had already concluded that that was a "separate matter."

"And you, Shimako-san, you didn't want to do it at all last year, right? You only participated because you were pressured by Sei-sama. So you'd have to understand this side's feelings. Why have you joined that side, now that you're a Rose?"

"This side... ? That side... ?"

Shimako-san had a perplexed expression as she looked back and forth between where Yoshino was pointing with her left and right index fingers for a little while,

before finally saying, "It's not like that."

"It's not a matter of being on one side or the other. After last year's event, my opinion changed."

"Huh?"

She continued after another smile that could also be labeled a foul play.

"I think it was good that we gave it a go. Both for the Yamayurikai, and for myself personally. But it's only because I gave it a go that I can say that."

"_"

Come to think of it, during the candidate's speeches, Shimako-san had made some impassioned plea about using her experience to help the Yamaurikai, or something along those lines. Yoshino thought, "Damn it."

Incidentally.

The third-years, basically Sachiko-sama and Rei-chan, were sipping their tea and elegantly watching over the second-years' argument. No, watching over was the wrong expression. They were detached observers.

If their juniors had formed a unified opposition to the Valentine's Day event, in other words, if they'd done what Rei-chan did last year, then they probably would have applied pressure from above. But since Yumi-san and Shimako-san were interested in the plan, it'd be better if they could convince Yoshino themselves. There was no need for the third-years to intervene. That's how it was.

"So, then."

Yumi-san said.

"Suppose, for instance, our onee-samas weren't here right now. If Mami-san came to us with this proposal for Valentine's Day, what would your reaction be, Yoshino-san?"

A hypothetical question.

"What about Shimako-san?"

Would she be there or not? While it wasn't that important a detail, Yoshino

had been drawn into the conversation enough to ask a stupid question.

"She can be there or not. Which ever you'd prefer."

"Ooh."

Frankly speaking, Yoshino thought that either way she wouldn't really want to do it. It felt like she was getting further away from understanding why she was so opposed to it.

As Shimako-san had said, it would be good for the Yamayurikai – Yoshino could understand that. Yumi-san's aim of seeing Youko-sama's dream realized seemed like she'd followed an argument through to its logical conclusion.

So what didn't she like about it? Yoshino asked herself this question.

"Last year, you were totally opposed to the event during the planning stages too, but once it started you were really into it."

Yumi-san said, in place of the silent Yoshino.

"..."

That was true. Yoshino had realized as much herself. Last year's treasure hunt had been surprisingly exhilarating. The result was unfortunate, but looking back on it the event had been fun overall.

Then that meant that she wasn't harboring any ill-will which prevented her from getting on-board with the newspaper club's plan. So how was this year different to last year?

"I know."

Yoshino thumped her right fist into her left hand.

"It's because it's boring."

"B ... boring?"

Not just one person, it was everyone other than Yoshino that repeated this in surprise.

"That's right."

Last year, she'd had the clear-cut goal of "stopping someone else from going

on a date with Rei-chan," but if she was on the organizing side then it was nothing but meeting after meeting after meeting with the newspaper club, which meant all she got out of it was work. For someone who'd been all excited and nervous as a regular participant, becoming one of the game's main cast and deciding on the rules just didn't seem comparatively worthwhile.

On top of that, if they did the same thing as last year, then she'd have to go on a half-day date with the winner afterward. Putting it bluntly, that was a pain in the neck.

Now, suppose that Rei-chan participated and, luckily enough, won. Even then, going on a date with Rei-chan was too ordinary, it wouldn't get her heart racing.

If she absolutely had to co-operate, then she'd much rather play dirty so that nobody won. And since Rei-chan was taking entrance exams, she might not even participate in the game in the first place. Black Yoshino grinned.

Shimako-san timidly asked:

"Are you really opposed to it because it's boring?"

"That's right. Got a problem with that?"

Yoshino leaned back. Acting defiant. Now then, if they wanted her to participate, they'd have to fix the "boredom." If they could turn that into "fun," then she'd happily participate.

"... like that."

"Yeah, ... "

Yumi-san and Shimako-san leaned their heads close together and whispered to each other. The third-years kept on grinning. Mami-san looked serious, perhaps worried about who would break.

"Isn't that kind of childish?"

Despite having been silent the whole time, she suddenly spoke now.

"Ch-childish?"

Yoshino glared at her, but Noriko-chan calmly said, "Yeah."

"I don't know the details, but, to summarize, last year you happily participated

when the then-boutons and current-Roses were at the center of the Valentine's Day plans, but now that it's your turn you're saying it's boring and you don't want to do it. That's just selfish, isn't it? It's childish."

Even when her opponent was older, she said what she wanted to say. As an ally, Noriko-chan would have been as strong as 10,000 men. But to have Noriko-chan snapping at her, Yoshino had made a grave mistake. At the very least, to be called "childish" by someone in a lower grade than her had caused more damage to Yoshino than she'd expected to take.

"That's true. Your refusal to participate due to "boredom" is rejected."

Yumi-san said. That was to be expected. Last year's boutons had floated similar reasons, but they hadn't been able to get out of it.

Sealing the deal, Shimako-san cheerfully smiled and said, "Let's do it." It would have been better if she'd glared and said, "You have to do it," since that would have driven Yoshino to rebel more, but the way she smiled like Maria-sama was far more of a dirty play.

What to do, Yoshino? She was surrounded on six sides, not just all four.

Rei-chan and Sachiko-sama had tears in their eyes, trembling as they clutched their stomachs. Not because they were forcing themselves to hold back from assisting, but because they were stifling their laughter. Oh, how she'd hate it if they didn't stifle it.

"Even if you say that."

Since it had come to this, her only option was to agree. Even if she was childish, Yoshino had been alive for 17 years so she knew when she had to withdraw. But because of her earlier opposition, it was difficult for her to agree straight away. Some impetus was necessary to get Yoshino to change course and meet up with everyone else.

She wasn't raising a hand in agreement, nor both hands in surrender. Her arms were folded across her chest as she breathed a soft sigh. She raised her downcast head slightly and closed one eye, but not to wink. The pose she wanted to strike was one of, "By all rights, I'd never agree to this, but I'm willing to pitch in and help for your sake."

Then, unexpectedly, Mami-san lowered her head to just above the table.

"I'm begging you, Yoshino-san. I know you don't want to, but it would allow me, your classmate, to save face if you could somehow find it in your heart to co-operate with the newspaper club. We'll do our best to make sure you enjoy yourself."

Mami-san joined her hands together in prayer, going above and beyond to implore Yoshino. Ah, what a pitch she'd been tossed.

"Well ... "

Not from Yumi-san, or Shimako-san, or Noriko-chan. The farce only worked because it came from Mami-san. Yoshino gratefully came on board.

"If Mami-san's willing to go that far, I suppose I've got no choice."

Nice timing, good job.

In her mind, Yoshino flashed the peace sign.

Part 3

"Well then, I'd like to return to our discussion about the plans for this year's Valentine's Day event – is that okay with everyone?"

Mami-san resumed her presentation. The approximately ten minute long derailment was now over.

"Please take a look at the prepared documents."

Hearing this, Yoshino swapped the location of her cup of cooled tea and the printout. She flipped past the front cover which read, "Valentine's Day Event Proposal." The proposal was bound together by a staple in the top left hand corner, and the heading at the top of the second page was:

""Treasure Hunt: Where are the Bouton's Cards!?" Hold on, Mami-san. Isn't this last year's event?"

For a moment she thought that Mami-san may have inadvertently brought last year's document. But Mami-san nonchalantly said:

"Exactly. Last year's event had unprecedented popularity. Of course, we'll draw on our experience of last year to improve certain areas, and incorporate some feedback from the students that participated, so even though it's the same proposal this year's event will be bigger and better ... "

In other words, they couldn't think of anything that would top last year's event.

"I'll answer all your questions and concerns at the end."

Mami-san started her explanation. The meat of the event was the treasure hunt. A lot of the details were the same as last year, but there were a number of modifications.

"Last time, Rosa Chinensis' red card was the only one that wasn't found within the time limit."

Mami-san looked to Sachiko-sama, as though for confirmation.

"Yes."

Then Sachiko-sama looked at Yumi-san, seated beside her. In turn, Yumi should have looked at someone else, but it stopped there, with her looking back at Sachiko-sama.

There was a reason behind this relay of meaningful glances.

During last year's event, only Rei-chan's yellow card and Shimako-san's white card were located – nobody found the red card. But, when they went to check, they were met with the mystery of the card being found in a location that Yumi-san had searched in vain during the event. At that point, there was a dispute between the Red Rose soeurs as to the depth at which the card was buried. Incidentally, it was buried in the old greenhouse, next to the Rosa Chinensis plant.

But, naturally, the point of Mami-san's question wasn't about the mystery of whether the card was buried or not. It was that the card hadn't been found.

"It's such a shocking waste to go to all the effort of hiding the card, only to have it go undiscovered. We expected there would be three winners last time, but there were only two. If we went by the same rules as last year, then what if – what if – none of the three cards were found, then we'd have no winners at all. Now, the chance of that dreadful outcome happening is low, but we have to take some measures to avoid it altogether."

The newspaper club's plan was to have something like a repechage round, so that the card would definitely end up in someone's hands.

"Hmm."

In that case, Yoshino's plan of avoiding going on a date with someone she didn't know by hiding the card in a location no-one would find was probably futile.

"What are the specifics of this repechage round?"

Sachiko-sama inquired. Yoshino was idly expecting it would be scissors-paper-rock, but it looked like Mami-san had a different idea.

"This year, I was thinking we should give those students that can't take part on the day a chance too."

"The people who can't participate? That sounds like a good idea."

Rei-chan's eyes sparkled. Obviously pleased that she'd be able to participate in the treasure hunt in some small way, even if she couldn't make it to the event because of her exams.

Enough, enough. Can't she have even just a semblance of a poker face? Yoshino looked away. Rei-chan was currently wagging her tail like a dog about to be fed. And it's like she wasn't even embarrassed by it.

"Yoshino-chan, you seem pleased by that."

Sachiko-sama looked straight at her.

"No way."

Damn it. It looked like she'd caught the giggles just by looking at Rei-chan's face.

Incidentally, Mami-san had said "repechage." On the third page of the proposal was the heading "Absentee's Chance" – which looked to be it.

"Since it's held after a regular school day, I'm sure there will be people who want to participate but won't be able to due to their own individual circumstances. Let's call this a lifeline for them."

So that's it – it was like the absentee ballots for an election that they occasionally talked about on the news. Mami-san had apparently taken a hint from that sort of thing.

"We'll set up a post box, where they can "post" a form saying where they think a card will be hidden, up until the day before the event – or whatever time limit we decide. Of course, the box won't be opened until after the event, so the boutons can't change their hiding position after looking at the predictions."

"I see. Then if the card isn't found during the event, it will go to whoever submitted an entry with the correct location?"

"Exactly. That way, if all the cards are found on the day, the second-chance entries instantly become void, regardless of how many had the correct location."

"What will you do if a card isn't found on the day, but there are multiple entries in the box with the correct location?"

"It'll be sorted out by scissors-paper-rock the following day, in front of the newspaper club and the person who hid the card."

"And if there isn't a correct entry in the box?"

"We could go with whoever got closest ... although, if it comes to that, we could draw it like a lottery, or pick whoever wrote the funniest answer – I don't think it really matters. For the minor details, I want to hear your opinion, but I don't want to get bogged down in them just now, okay?"

Everyone nodded, there was no objection.

"Will the entries have to have the color of the card as well as the location?"

Rei-chan asked, raising her hand. She was all eager and full of questions now that she thought there was a chance she could take part.

"No, just where it's hidden. Don't you think it's better if it operates under the same rules as the treasure hunt itself?"

For the people who were searching on the day, even if they had a card they were aiming for, they didn't have to declare that in order to participate. As a result, if they chanced upon some other card, there was no disputing their ownership of it.

But still, that Rei-chan. Even though she'd just been told that they didn't want to get bogged down in minor details. Mami-san forced a smile.

"Were there any other questions?"

"Yes."

As Yoshino shot her hand up, so too did Yumi-san and Noriko-chan – in short, all the boutons raised their hand. As the ones with the leading role in this event, it was something that affected them directly, so they were all taking it seriously.

It was something she could have let go without comment, but then it would have remained unresolved.

"Well then, we'll start with Yoshino-san."

Mami-san asked her first, since she had been the one to raise her hand with the most force, after all. Yoshino cleared her throat and said, "Okay then," before continuing.

"I had a question about the "Project Aims" section."

Then the other two nodded and said, "Yeah." It looked like they all had questions about the same thing.

"It says, "To promote interaction between regular students and the boutons who will become Roses next school year." ... "

After reading that far, Mami-san finally noticed and let out a little, "Ah."

"Drat. I forgot to fix that part."

No matter how many times Mami-san drew her finger across that section of the document, it was too late now. To make it worse, now that this had been pointed out her tongue was tied.

"I see."

"I read that but it went straight past me."

Rei-chan and Sachiko-sama looked at the boutons in admiration.

"... I messed up."

Mami-san lowered her head, crestfallen. Since the event was largely the same as last year, she'd probably followed the same format as last year's proposal. Only modifying the year, and the parts of the event she wanted changed. However, last year the "boutons" had been the "next year's Roses," but they couldn't say that this year.

That's right – the White Rose soeurs.

The "next year's Rose" was Shimako-san, but the "bouton" was Noriko-chan. Those tangled circumstances came about because Shimako-san was going to be a Rose for two years running.

As a result, obviously she'd be interested.

"Who will it be?"

Somebody asked.

"It'll be ... "

Shimako-san and Noriko-chan looked at each other then said:

"Noriko."

"Onee-sama."

Usually the White Rose soeurs got along preposterously well, hardly ever fighting or having a clash of opinions. But this time around their opinions were wildly divergent.

"Huh – "

The pair looked at each other in surprise. Apparently they'd both thought that the other was naturally going to do it. Would that be optimism, or over-estimation of the other? If it had been the Yellow Rose soeurs, then they still would have tried to pin it on the other, but they wouldn't have been surprised that their opinions differed.

"It says "bouton" and that's you, Noriko."

"But the "next year's Rose" is you, isn't it onee-sama?"

The one point they agreed on was that the other should do it. But that was no good.

(Hmm.)

Yoshino analyzed the situation.

Shimako-san had probably thought that Noriko-chan was going to do it, right from the start. Because the proposal's title said "Bouton" while Shimako-san was a "Rose."

But what about Noriko-chan? Since they'd been saying "bouton this" and "bouton that," she'd probably resigned herself to the task. But now that the situation had been muddled due to Mami-san's innocent mistake, she was probably looking to escape.

(Well then.)

In the end, it looked like Noriko-chan didn't want to do it if she didn't have to. But despite that, she had insulted her senior by calling her "childish."

At any rate, this was the White Rose soeurs' crisis. That was fitting, since the petit soeur was trying to push work onto the grande soeur. Had the usually peaceful White Rose soeurs stumbled upon their White Rose Revolution?

"My apologies. It was my mistake to think that bouton was a synonym for future Rose."

Mami-san said, looking meek. Her posture was similar to earlier, when she'd appealed for Yoshino to co-operate, but her demeanor was completely different. Well, the earlier one was nothing but an act.

"That's right – which one did you mean, Mami-san?"

Naturally, the ball was now in the court of the person who had come to them with the proposal.

"Um, as the cause of all this chaos it may be a bit irresponsible for me to say this but, I'm sorry, I don't have a definitive answer. I don't mind who it is, as long as one of you does it. So with that, I'd like to hear everyone's thoughts."

"Our thoughts ... "

First of all, the reason why it had been the boutons last year was because the Roses were all third-years and about to graduate – and on top of that, they'd all been taking entrance exams, so they wouldn't have had much spare time. With that in mind, there was no reason Shimako-san couldn't do it this year.

"But I did it last year."

Shimako-san mumbled. Then Sachiko-sama quickly rejected that.

"We can't accept that reason. If we accept it now, from you, then Noriko-chan would be able to make the same excuse."

Exactly. If they decided that Noriko-chan had to do it because Shimako-san had already done it once, then there would be nobody to do it next year. In this situation, either Noriko-chan or Shimako-san would have to do it twice.

However.

"But, depending on the results of next year's election, Noriko won't necessarily become Rosa Gigantea."

Huh?

Shimako-san chipped in with an amazing opinion. But Noriko-chan wasn't about to be defeated.

"You're talking about what would happen if I lose next year's election and don't become Rosa Gigantea? Well, since you've brought it up, wouldn't it be strange for someone like that to be one of the drawcards in this year's event? If I hid the card this year, then went on a date with someone, but didn't become a student council leader and was just an ordinary student – it'd be a joke."

That was a reasonable opinion. Now Shimako-san was at a disadvantage. It was too late for her to say, "Don't worry, Noriko will definitely be the next Rosa Gigantea so she should do it," because it wouldn't completely remove the inconsistency.

"Shimako. Why don't you accept this and step up?"

"You'll be fine doing it two years in a row – you have plenty of fans out there."

Sachiko-sama and Rei-chan were both leaning towards the idea that Shimako-san should do it.

Yoshino too looked straight into Shimako-san's eyes and said:

"Let's do it."

It was meant as payback for earlier. Of course, Yoshino knew her smile was nowhere near as angelic as Shimako-san's.

But Shimako-san didn't agree immediately. She lowered her gaze, as though unsure of what to do.

"... What should I do?"

She'd said that she'd been glad she did it last year. So she should be fine doing it again this year. So why wasn't she?

Normally, Shimako-san wouldn't be so insistent about it. She'd smile, nod her head, and say, "If that's what everyone thinks, then I suppose I'll have to give it a go."

"What is it?"

Because of her unusual behavior, everyone was starting to feel nervous. Shimako-san was fired up.

"I."

Eventually, Shimako-san meekly started to speak.

"I don't hate the idea of hiding a card."

"Okay."

Everybody earnestly agreed with Shimako-san. Then they all held their breath in anticipation for what she was about to say next.

"It's just, I wanted to search for the card that Noriko had hidden."

... Huh?

What did she just say?

It's – just, – I – wanted – to – search – for – the – card – that – Noriko – had – hidden.

"Huh!?"

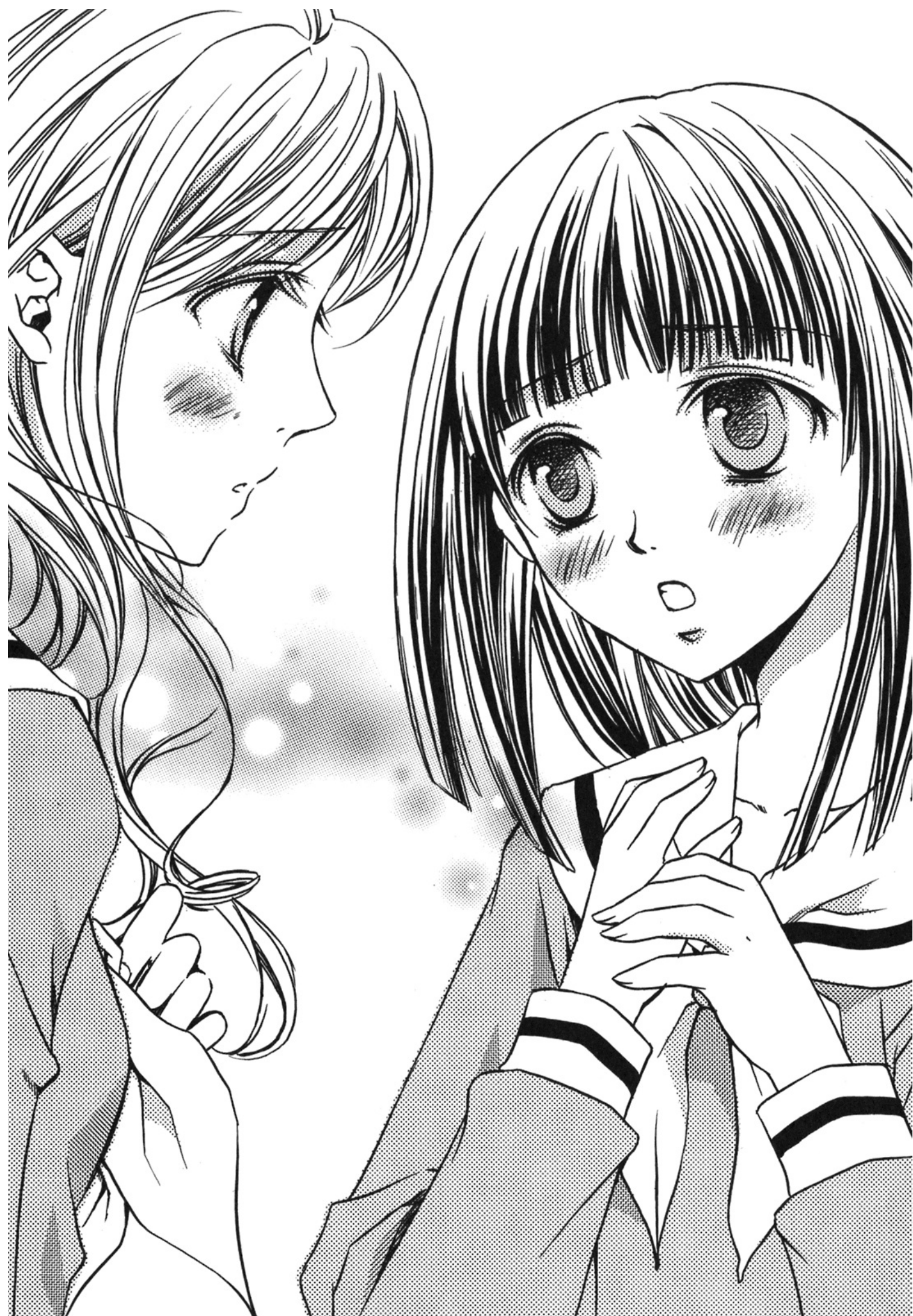
Everybody was taken aback by that explanation. Well, it wasn't as though the desire to find her petit soeur's card was wrong. On the contrary, it was fine. Having no other reason than that even added to its persuasiveness.

Still, for someone as selfless as Shimako-san to want to get out of work for her own personal desires – it wasn't quite self-indulgence, but it was certainly something. They'd all been surprised by that discrepancy.

Still, Yoshino thought that in some way that was fine. Because the usual Shimako-san was far too much of a goody-goody.

"Me too."

Noriko-chan admitted.



"I heard about last year's event from my classmates, Atsuko-san and Miyuki-san, and I thought about how nice it would be to search for your card."

Her face blushing, desperately trying to get her feelings across.

"But I'd given up on that because I was a bouton this year so it wouldn't happen, but then when they started talking about whether it was the boutons or the next Roses, I thought there was a chance."

"Noriko ... "

The White Rose soeurs gazed into each others eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

What was up with this pleasant mood? Where the heck had Noriko-chan's rebellion and Shimako-san's dictatorship disappeared to?

Sachiko-sama forced her way between them.

"Shimako, are you worried about the Rosa Gigantea that will succeed you?"

"No. I believe Noriko will be able to take over from me splendidly."

Shimako-san said clearly.

"In that case, you should co-operate with the newspaper club again this year. Let your petit soeur see your hardworking side. That way, Noriko-chan will know what to do next year."

Since she'd been told it was for Noriko-chan's sake, Shimako-san couldn't say, "Even so." Rei-chan added in her attempt at persuasion.

"Besides, in a year's time you'll be able to participate unreservedly. If this year's event is popular, they'll have it next year too. Right, Mami-san?"

"Of course. We'll be doing our best to make this event something the younger students will enjoy and want to do again."

With this assurance from the head of the newspaper club, Shimako-san smiled, raised her head and said, "In that case."

Despite all that had happened, in the end the pressure from the seniors had

counted for everything. There had been opposition, but perhaps that was the fate of today's meeting.

Part 4

In the end.

The White Roses remained close. They'd arrived at different conclusions because they loved each other too much.

Ah, how moronic. It had been a little bit exciting but it all came to naught.

"I'll get everyone a refill of tea."

Yoshino placed both hands on the table and shot out of her seat.

"I'll help you."

Yumi-san followed her.

"Ah."

Noriko-chan stood up after a short pause, but two people were enough to do the job so she was turned down. Overly happy people were an eyesore, so she should just stay out of sight for a little while longer.

"Nice to be Shimako-san."

Yoshino mumbled, even though she knew it wouldn't help anything. Not only did Shimako-san already have herself a petit soeur, but she didn't have to see off her onee-sama either.

"That's true."

Yumi-san agreed. But Shimako-san had had to say goodbye to her onee-sama on her own a year ago, and she'd taken it upon herself to find her new partner Noriko-chan, so Yoshino couldn't really hold it against her.

And Yumi-san knew that Yoshino knew this. Which was why she'd simply agreed. Because Yoshino would be satisfied with that.

The teakettle had switched to the "keeping hot" mode a while ago.

As she rinsed the collected teacups, Yumi-san whispered: "Nana-chan will be in high-school soon."

"... Yeah."

Thinking about this, Yoshino's chest ached a little. Nana would finally be in high-school. Swapping in for Rei-chan. Of course, Rei-chan wasn't being driven out to free up a space for her.

Yoshino understood the reasons. But even so, the look of loneliness on Rei-chan's face immediately after her bout against Nana during the winter break remained in Yoshino's heart.

It wasn't as though Yoshino had chosen Nana. But, in that moment, Rei-chan had let go of Yoshino.

"Yoshino-san, you're spilling the tea leaves."

Yumi-san took the tin of Darjeeling tea and teaspoon off her. She'd apparently finished washing the teacups while Yoshino had been distracted. Now she was looking in the teapot, and had estimated the amount of tea leaves Yoshino had already put in there as, "Two, no about three teaspoons, I guess."

"Say, Yumi-san."

"Mm?"

Yumi-san responded as she added another two teaspoons of tea leaves.

"You're so calm. What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't really know, you've just been calm recently."

"Well if you don't know, then I don't know."

Yumi-san laughed.

Indeed. Still, that was how she felt, so she couldn't offer a better explanation.

"Setting aside me and Nana, what do you intend to do about Touko-chan?"

"Even if I wanted to do something, there's not a lot I can do."

Yumi-san mumbled, pouring the hot water into the teapot.

"You're not going to be soeurs?"

"I'd like to, but it's not going to happen if she won't say yes."

"That's true, but ... "

She didn't know what Touko-chan was thinking, but Yumi-san had clearly conveyed that she wasn't going to give up. And because Yumi-san wasn't going to give up, it seemed as though those feelings had earned Sachiko-sama's respect, and Noriko-chan seemed to think that Touko-chan actually liked Yumi-san.

Given all that, even Yoshino expected that Touko-chan would eventually become Yumi-san's petit soeur. Even though when she first heard that Yumi-san had been turned down, she had wondered what sort of a person could do that.

"If I appear calm, it's probably – "

Yumi-san said, as they waited for the tea leaves to dissipate.

"Because I'm not in a hurry, I guess."

"Not in a hurry?"

Yoshino asked and Yumi-san responded with, "Yeah."

"Like, do I have to find a petit soeur before my onee-sama graduates? Or, do I have to do everything I can to make Touko-chan my petit soeur? It's strange, but I'm not really in a hurry."

Yoshino didn't really understand. How had she arrived at that point of view?

"But what caused it?"

"I'm not sure if it's actually the cause, but if I was forced I'd probably say the student council election."

"The election?"

"Yeah, the election. I'd been thinking about what sort of relationship I wanted to have with Touko-chan after the election. Racking my brain. And all I came up with was that I wouldn't get an answer if I rushed."

Hearing her friend talk like that, Yoshino hurriedly grasped her hand. Yumi-san had been about to pick up the teapot, so she looked at Yoshino with a, "What

are you doing?" expression.

"Yumi-san, don't become an adult on your own."

Yoshino pleaded in a strangled voice.

"Huh? I'm not, not at all."

"Don't leave me behind."

"What are you worrying about? You're being strange, Yoshino-san."

Really. For some reason she suddenly wanted to cry. However.

"Because."

She could hear the ongoing chatter from the five people at the table behind her. The topic of conversation had switched from last year's treasure hunt to the half-day dates and had just now returned to the treasure hunt.

"Oh, right. I just had a great idea."

Yumi-san said, having just finished pouring tea into the teacups.

"But, hmm. It could be tough. Although if it comes off, I think it'll get you excited for the event."

"What is it?"

Don't just think about it on your own, share it. Yoshino didn't even know what would be tough.

"Well, there's nothing to lose."

Yumi-san turned around.

"Hey, Mami-san."

Naturally, the idle chatter that had been floating around the table came to a stop. Yumi-san paid no attention to that as she made her proposal, eyes sparkling.

"How about we let the middle-school students participate this year? There were some that snuck over to have a look last year, right?"

"Hang on, Yumi-san."

Yoshino called out to stop her meddling friend, but Yumi-san apparently didn't hear as she was engrossed in her conversation with Mami-san.

The seven cups had been left behind in Yoshino's care.

Perhaps there was a chance that Nana would be able to participate.

"Geeze, that Yumi-san."

The corners of Yoshino's mouth had spontaneously curved upwards.

Because, didn't she just tell Yumi-san not to leave her behind?

Part 5

It could be called "obvious" or "natural," but the teachers didn't give permission for the middle-school students to participate in the treasure hunt.

However, as a result of Mami-san's repeated visits to the staff room to try and persuade the teachers, the middle-school students were allowed to participate in the second-chance draw.

"Last year, the middle-school teachers caught a number of their students trying to join in, so it seems like they'd been thinking about how to crack down on it this year."

Mami-san said, looking out the hallway window towards the middle-school building.

It was after school.

It looked as though Mami-san had only recently received permission for the middle-school students to participate in the second-chance draw, and had caught Yoshino on her way out of the classroom after cleaning to happily relay this information. At any rate, they had another meeting today, so they were going to meet at the Rose Mansion anyway, but apparently Mami-san couldn't wait until then. Well, she probably had a sneaking suspicion that Yoshino was interested in the result.

"It seemed like the teachers were in a bit of a bind. Their students wouldn't accept it if they just blindly said it was forbidden, and there's some girls that would do it regardless of the punishment, right? Last year, some students even went as far as putting on a high-school uniform."

In which case, the teachers wouldn't be able to check. It seemed unlikely they'd be able to look at each and every face and determine whether they were in middle-school or high-school.

"Ah, like Shouko-chan."

Yoshino raised her finger.

"Shouko-chan? Ah, Tsutako-san's."

"Yeah. Tsutako-san's."

The pair giggled as they watched their familiar classmate exit the classroom, camera in hand. Probably going to the clubhouse. She walked boldly, not noticing Yoshino and Mami-san chatting in the hallway.

Where on earth was Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan's relationship headed?

No. It would be bad form to demand some sort of speedy resolution.

Yoshino thought it was better to take a long-term view, like Yumi-san. To do what she could do now, and leave it at that.

"So they're going to use participation in the second-chance draw as a bargaining point, and ban all middle-school students from taking part on the actual day."

At some point, Mami-san had resumed their earlier conversation.

"They'll still be able to legally participate, albeit indirectly. The teachers think that the students will abide by those rules."

Even though the likelihood of the second-chance votes coming into play was extremely small, since the ballots would be rendered invalid if all of the cards were found on the day itself. And in the one-in-a-million chance that some middle-school students won the ballot, they'd only have to keep an eye on those one or two students.

"Well, it won't necessarily go the way the teachers imagine."

Mami-san smiled daringly. Although obviously she hadn't shot holes in the teachers' theory at the staff room.

"So, there you have it. What are you going to do, Yoshino-san? Are you going to go and tell Nana-chan about it?"

"Mm."

Yoshino started by stretching. During those one or two seconds she thought

about it and came to a conclusion.

"Not now."

"Oh?"

"Well, there's no need to rush, right?"

For some reason, Yoshino wanted to try and imitate Yumi-san. Nana was not Touko-chan, and Yoshino herself was not Yumi-san. So they couldn't be measured by the same scale.

But even so, Yumi-san's words resonated with her. Yoshino found them frankly admirable.

Putting them into practice was simple. And if she lost interest in it, Yoshino could always go back to rushing around everywhere.

"Well then, I guess we should get going."

To the Rose Mansion. To discuss the Valentine's day event, with a mix of boredom and just a tiny bit of excitement.

"Besides."

Yoshino mumbled as they walked.

"They're all different, but, surprisingly, at their core they're all the same."

"Who?"

Mami-san asked.

"Soeurs."

Yoshino declared.

"Shimako-sa~n."

Yoshino called out, waving to her friend walking ahead of her.

What I Wanted to Ask

"Thanks for all your hard work."

After opening the door, Yumi-sama gave a quick wave.

"Ah."

Noriko stopped wiping the table.

"Go-gokigenyou."

Noriko was so stiff she wanted to poke fun at herself – "What are you so nervous about?"

"Gokigenyou. You're doing a great job, as always."

Noriko's nerves were despite the fact that they saw each other fairly often. And despite Yumi-sama not being the type of person who intimidated her juniors – with all due respect.

It was probably because she and Yumi-sama were the only two people currently occupying the Rose Mansion. So she was more nervous than she had to be.

There was something she had to say before their many compatriots arrived.

So, in some respects, Noriko felt like she'd been waiting for this opportunity. Some day, when she was alone with Yumi-sama, she would ask about Touko.

"Say, there's something I've got to talk to you about, Noriko-chan."

"Huh?"

Hearing Yumi-sama's words, Noriko put herself on guard. Yumi-sama may have been surprised by this exaggerated reaction, as she quickly added: "Well, it can wait until Shimako-san and Yoshino-san get here though ... "

"Ah, that sort of thing."

If it was that sort of thing then it was of no great importance. Noriko felt a bit disappointed by her earlier odd reaction.

"Our meetings with Mami-san from the newspaper club will probably become more frequent before too long. Naturally, we'll be using this place a lot, so I was going to ask about what you were going to do during that time, since you said you'd be participating in the treasure hunt. In my opinion, I think it's fine for you to keep coming, except for when we're deciding where to hide the cards. Because what happened last year was I – "

Noticing that the conversation was going completely over Noriko's head, Yumi-sama asked: "What's the matter?"

"Ah, pardon me."

Watching her hastily apologizing junior, Yumi-sama smiled and sighed.

"Wha~t, you thought I wanted to talk to you about Touko-chan?"

"... Yeah."

She'd been completely seen though. All she could do was answer honestly.

"Well, there hasn't really been any progress, so there's not much to talk about."

Yumi-sama muttered. Noriko gripped the dish cloth tight and said, "Okay." Although her eyes were probably imploring Yumi-sama.

"But if there's something you want to ask, Noriko-chan, then go ahead. Although I can't guarantee you'll be satisfied by my answers."

Even so, Noriko thought that was good. She might be able to catch a glimpse of the feelings Yumi-sama had in her heart towards Touko.

Why have you been leaving Touko alone?

Can I trust what you said about not abandoning Touko?

Touko losing the election – in your opinion, what the heck was the point of that?

Do you feel like you'd offer Touko your rosary again, or not?

There were plenty of things she wanted to ask. But she didn't know where to

start. And no matter which one she asked, she felt like she wouldn't get an answer that she would be satisfied by.

But despite that, her words spilled out.

"Do you like Touko?"

"I do. I love her."

Yumi-sama answered, without a moment's hesitation.

"Then that's fine."

Noriko didn't have any more questions. After a small nod, Noriko resumed her task of wiping the table.

Shimako-san, Yoshino-sama, and Mami-sama would arrive before too long, but it wasn't as though she'd run out of time.

Yumi liked Touko.

That was the main thing, and Noriko realized it was the number one thing she wanted to ask.

Keyhole of the Heart

Pitiable Person

Part 0

She wandered alone in the morning mist.

A gown worn over her sleep-wear. She would have put her slippers on when she got out of bed, but one of them must have caught on something because there was only one for her to take off now.

When was it lost?

Who took it?

In amongst that cloudiness, where she couldn't see more than a metre in front of her, shaking each tree trunk that appeared one after the other, she still felt she'd been left behind.

It would have been better if they were people. In that case, she might have received some sort of hint.

Blood oozing from her bare feet, she walked without pause.

There was no way she could stop until she'd retrieved her precious possession.

"—chan."

Her cry was absorbed by the mist, not even her own voice could reach her ears any more.

Where should she go?

No matter how far she walked, it felt like she was going around in circles. The visibility always remained low.

Her feet felt distant and she had no confidence that she was properly putting one foot in front of the other.

"Ah."

Eventually she tripped over a tree root, falling down onto her hands. In that

pure white landscape, only the blood spilling from the palms of her hands was a vibrant red.

"I'm."

Why was it that she was doing this?

It felt like she was searching for something. But what was it?

In a daze, she sat down on a thick tree root that protruded from the ground like a branch.

There was no way she could stop until she'd retrieved her precious possession. But having just stopped, she couldn't comprehend.

What was it she was searching for?

Where was it that she thought she should go?

"I don't know."

Should she keep going forwards, or turn back?

No matter which way she chose, the mist surrounded her on all four sides, so there was no way she could be sure that what she thought was forward was in front of her, and that what was behind her was the way she had come.

"What do I do?"

While she was still perplexed.

"...?"

She could hear the sound of someone crying coming from somewhere.

"..."

It was faint, but she could definitely hear it. There was no mistaking it. She remembered her initial goal and ran in the direction of the sound.

Not even her own voice reached her ears. But despite all that. The voice grew steadily clearer, and then louder.

As though it were calling out to her. Like the shining beam from a lighthouse, guiding her way at sea.

At long last she found it.

Lying down on the fallen leaves, wrapped in pure white swaddling clothes, a tiny life-force.

"Ahh."

With trembling hands she clasped it to her breast.

She'd finally found it. They'd never be separated again.

"My ... baby."

As she hugged it tight, the resistance disappeared.

The pure white swaddling clothes unraveled and what she had thought was her baby fell from her arms and pattered down on the ground.

"Ah, ah."

She frantically gathered the dry leaves that covered her knees and feet.

But they would no longer return to their original form.

"Noooo – "

Her grief-stricken cry cut through the mist.

Part 1

"Noooo – "

The shriek echoed in the dead of night.

"Mama, mama."

Touko rushed over, turning on the bedside light and shaking her mother by the shoulder until she awoke.

"Haa ... haa ... haa."

Ragged breathing. Her eyes were open, but she hadn't fully woken up. She'd tripped on the boundary between dreams and reality and was struggling forwards.

"It's alright. It was just a dream."

Touko stroked her mother's cheek, fixing her errant strands of hair.

"It's alright."

She repeated. Then, as though she were gradually understanding the state of affairs, her mom took a couple of deep breaths before mumbling, as though for confirmation:

"Touko-chan."

"That's right."

Touko affirmed. Then she repeated, "It's alright," once more. This one wasn't for her mother – she said it to calm herself down.

"You're really sweating."

There should be a towel somewhere in the room. When Touko stood up from the bedside, she was grabbed by her pajama sleeve.

"Don't go."

"Mama ... "

Touko went back to kneeling down on the carpet.

"Don't go. Don't leave mama behind. Please."

She implored her daughter, tears in her eyes.

She was still in thrall to her dream. So she was terrified of being alone.

As she rubbed her mom's shoulder, Touko cast her gaze around the room. Her dad wasn't anywhere to be seen – the bed beside her mom was empty.

"Yeah. I'm here."

Touko had a vague idea of what her mother's dream was about.

It had happened a number of times in the last month or two. Her mom would have a nightmare and cry out in the night.

Typically it would be handled by Touko's dad, sleeping next to her mom, but there were nights like tonight when Touko came running to soothe her mother. In those cases, her mom would always say she had a terrible dream. Her words were muddled once she'd fully woken up, but while she was still confused some fragments of her dream would come tumbling out of her mouth.

– My baby's gone.

Those words were something Touko couldn't ask about. So she would let it pass, without comment.

Because her mom was someone to pity. Touko knew that it would cause trouble if she were to ask her what she meant by that.

"Where would I go? This is the only home I have."

She lost her child over and over in her dreams. So even though it was only Touko appearing in front of her, she desperately tried to cling on to her.

"It's alright."

So Touko repeated, "It's alright," over and over to get her mother to calm down. It didn't matter that it was a stopgap measure, or a mere consolation. Touko felt that it was because of this that she could control her own emotions too.

"Your next dream will be a good one."

Touko smiled as she adjusted the quilt.

"I wonder."

Touko said, "Definitely," to her anxious mom.

"I'll stay here with you until you fall asleep again, mama."

"Okay."

In the dim light of the lamp, her mom's face looked like that of a young girl, and an elderly woman.

Part 2

Leaving her parents' bedroom, she found her father there.

"Papa ... "

"I'm sorry."

He was leaning against the wall next to the bedroom door, smiling at her. It looked like he'd been there for quite a while. He may have arrived not long after Touko entered their bedroom.

"It's nothing."

Touko shook her head, and put her hand on her pajama collar.

It was cold in the hall, after all. She'd come running when she heard her mother's scream, so she hadn't had time to put anything else on. The air chilled her neck.

"I'm sorry."

Her dad repeated. As though apologizing that he hadn't been there for his wife's mishap.

"I went to the toilet, then thought I'd stop in at the kitchen for a nightcap."

Touko's dad took off his dressing gown and draped it over her shoulders. His familiar smell covered her body. It was warm.

"You couldn't sleep?"

" – No."

He shook his head slightly, but Touko wasn't sure whether he was telling the truth or not. Her dad wasn't much of a drinker. He would drink at work functions, but at home he rarely touched alcohol. And a nightcap? It was hard to believe.

"Is it because of me ... ?"

She said, somewhat lightheartedly, and was met with a serious expression.

"Not at all."

But her mom had been having nightmares for the past month and a half. Touko had run away from home midway through December last year, so there was no way the two were completely unrelated.

Because of her mom's instability, her dad wasn't sleeping soundly either. In that case, it could be said that her dad's insomnia was Touko's fault after all.

"Like that."

Her dad mumbled, gazing at Touko.

"You're always forcing yourself to fit in. We were so stupid, we never suspected that when you were behaving like a spoiled child, or being willful, that it was you acting the part of an innocent daughter."

He looked forlorn.

"You too, papa. You read too much into things."

It was hard on Touko, knowing that she was the one who caused him to have such an expression, when usually he covered her in a warm smile.

"I've never for a moment thought that I was forcing myself. I'm sure that was all me. My personality took that shape because that's the sort of person I wanted to be."

That was all she could say at this point.

She had been the one to destroy the balance within their family. She didn't want to tell a lie that would only patch things over on the surface.

Even if it were to be mended, it could never return to the way it was before. She didn't want things fixed if that just meant that the destruction had been in vain.

"Back then, that argument seemed to come as quite a shock to mama."

Her dad said, looking towards the bedroom.

"On the other hand, I thought it was a good thing. Because if you hadn't hit us with your feelings, we may never have known the screaming in your heart."

Touko's hands naturally moved to cover her chest, as though guided by the phrase, "the screaming in your heart."

Thinking back, it had always kind of felt like her suppressed emotions were shouting, "Let me out of here."

I'm here.

Notice me.

It's not like I can't think for myself.

I'm only pretending to not see anything, to not hear anything.

"I don't know how long you've known, but it must have been a heavy burden for you to bear alone at your age. It's better that we, your parents, carry it."

But what now, now that the dam had burst? Having spewed forth her feelings, all that remained was a large hole in her heart, and self-loathing.

The end result was that she'd driven off her mom and made her dad worry. Had it really been necessary for her to let those feelings out?

She didn't know.

Why had she said those things?

Had she thrown out those harsh words, contrary to her feelings?

"That's why, even now, I still agree with grandpa's decision."

Touko's father looked her straight in the eye.

"You should paint your own life on a blank canvas, without worrying about anyone else ... That wish of mine, it's not tossing you aside. Do you understand?"

Touko didn't respond to that. No, she wasn't able to respond.

Above all, she never doubted that her parents loved her. But, if that were the case, didn't it mean that Touko wasn't necessary.

"Papa."

Instead of responding, Touko asked a question.

"Isn't everything in this world give and take?"

"Huh?"

"Is it okay to just take and take?"

"... What are you saying?"

Her dad asked, looking perplexed.

"Touko has nothing to give back."

Taking off the dressing gown, she held it out to her father. He accepted it, then looked gently into her eyes.

"Don't be silly. Mama, grandpa, and I have already received so much from you, Touko."

"Really?"

"Of course."

Smiling at that statement, Touko walked off down the corridor.

"Touko. I'm really grateful to you."

Touko's dad called out as she walked away, then he opened the door to the bedroom where her mom was sleeping. She didn't turn around. But she could tell that he would watch over her until she returned to her own room.

Even though she was receiving so much love.

She had nothing to give back.

(We've already received so much from you, Touko.)

Her father had said there was, "so much," but she couldn't think of a single thing.

The hallway felt uncomfortably long.

Fortunate Interview

Part 1

The new week brought annoying rumors.

"... student council elections."

"I knew Touko-san would ... "

"She's so reckless."

Each individual whisper was quiet, but when they were all added up it made them easy to hear. The excited chatter about last night's TV shows, so loud it could be heard out in the hallway, was far less irritating.

That said, if she were asked if she'd rather be insulted directly, then she'd probably say no, since that came with its own set of problems. If she got fed up with pretending to ignore them, she could always confront them directly.

(So moronic.)

If only recess would end soon. Touko turned a page of her book. And with that, she felt depressed that her own time was going to waste.

If the words on the page had made their way into her brain then she wouldn't have called it a waste of time, but she couldn't just shut out everything and concentrate on her book when her name was being whispered around.

So, regardless of whether she took in the words or not, when her eyes reached the last row of text she turned the page. By keeping up her, "I don't care at all about the rumors," act, Touko was at least able to retain some of her pride.

(Ah.)

Noriko returned to the classroom and walked past Touko's desk. After the election, she would look at Touko as though she had something she wanted to say, but she hadn't yet said anything.

Has she finally given up?

That was to be expected. Touko was just paying for her own mistakes.

She was frankly amazed that Noriko was still willing to be seen with her.

She still felt an empty hole in her chest.

Touko understood that this was her reward for picking apart the threads that bound them together, one by one.

Why was it that she always did this sort of thing?

If she was just a bit more honest, she probably wouldn't hurt herself and others as much.

"Hey, is that any way to be talking about one of your classmates?"

The loud voice coming from behind her brought Touko back from the hole in her heart to the first-year camellia group classroom.

"Aren't you ashamed about getting together to spread malicious rumors?"

The moment she realized that the conversation was about their behavior towards her, Touko instinctively turned around. Expecting Noriko to be the speaker.

But she was wrong. Noriko was sitting at her desk, a short distance away, also staring in amazement at the center of the commotion.

"Don't you think it's a bit late to be the good little girl? Last week, you were saying you wanted Touko to lose the election too."

The maligned students hit back, not backing down. The two arguing parties had, indeed, been in agreement last week. Attacking Touko, ignoring Touko, they were both the same thing.

"What was it that you said again?"

Pressed by her former comrades, the classmate who came to Touko's aid acknowledged her own crimes as she responded:

"While I may have called her reckless, Touko-san gave it her all in the election. You must have seen the effort she put in too? All on her own? It was incredible. It made me feel ashamed of myself. I asked myself, as her classmate, why didn't I help her? Why didn't our whole class unite behind her?"

Then, from within the group of gossipers, a couple of voices piped up, endorsing this opinion with, "Me too." There was internal discord.

"Look, I like Touko-san as a person. But if she wanted our support, shouldn't she have discussed it with the class before running off and nominating herself?"

"Isn't that a problem with our class not providing the right environment for such a discussion?"

"Oh, so now you're saying that we're the problem?"

The argument between the two factions gradually started to heat up. Even though Touko herself had never wanted this to happen.

If she'd wanted them to argue, it would have been over some other topic – having the fight be about her made it more of a nuisance.

Fed up with this, Touko turned to face the front and found someone standing in front of her desk.

"Unforeseen repercussions are a pain, aren't they?"

Kanako-san smiled, gently shifting her long hair so it didn't spill onto the desk. She was tall at the best of times, and Touko was seated, so she was quite the imposing sight.

"What do you know?"

Touko responded. Kanako-san's know-it-all air was a bit annoying, but it was ten, no a hundred times less annoying than the people arguing behind her.

"Nothing. But you're making that face. You were annoyed that someone would speak out like that. And now you're fed up with it."

"That's quite observant of you. I'm impressed."

Touko said with just a touch of sarcasm. Implying that Kanako-san must have a lot of free time, to be able to study each and every person's face.

But Kanako-san completely missed the sarcasm. Or maybe she got it, but chose to ignore it.

"Well, since you're complimenting me, I'll let you in on something. When you're reading a book, it looks more realistic if you subtly vary your pace every so often."

"Huh?"

"Normally, you'd stop when you got a kanji character mixed up, or you'd have to re-read some difficult passages, right?"

Indeed. Basically, she was telling Touko that she'd seen through her "reading a book" act. Kanako-san grinned and walked back to her own seat.

"That was informative."

With a nod, Touko closed her book. In truth, she didn't have to put a bookmark in there, but she thought that it made it look more realistic.

The argument behind her continued until the bell rang and their teacher entered the classroom.

Part 2

After school.

She went to the clubhouse for the first time in a while, and in the drama club's clubroom she spotted the club president.

"Ah, Touko-chan."

"... Gokigenyou. I apologize for my prolonged absence."

"It's fine, don't worry about it. Ah, it's a shame about the election."

"No ... "

Touko glanced at the calendar hanging from the wall to confirm her suspicions. As she'd expected, there were no club activities scheduled for today.

The club president was seated at a desk, writing something. It could probably be summed up as "solo overtime." Touko only got a quick look at the document, but it seemed to be some form that had to be submitted to the Yamayurikai council.

None of the rooms in the clubhouse were all that big. For the larger clubs, it wasn't possible to fit all their members in the room, so they used classrooms or gymnasiums for club activities. The drama club was one of those clubs – their clubroom was used as an office and a storeroom.

"Well, regardless of the result, it's the experience that's important. Even when you've forgotten about it, it may still prove useful to you at some point. You'll be able to broaden your acting skills."

"Like, in a political drama?"

Touko smirked – there weren't many high-school plays around that theme.

"Sounds good. How about a role as a female senator?"

How about it? Touko didn't respond, she simply nodded and said, "Hah."

"All sorts of things were decided while you were away, Touko-chan. I wanted you to hear about some of it prior to tomorrow's club activities, so I'm glad we met today."

The club president stopped filling out the form and set it to one side on the desk.

"The drama club has decided to put on a performance for the Third-Years' Send-Off, but –"

"President."

Touko interrupted her.

"I came here today to get a resignation form."

It was better if someone about to leave the club was not informed of their future activities. She'd planned on saying goodbye properly after filling out the resignation form, but with things the way they were she had to say something.

"... What are you saying?"

The club president stood up, the color draining from her face.

"So you see."

She cast her gaze across to the cabinet in the corner of the room, which should hold the resignation forms. It should be in either the second or third drawer, alongside the "application to join" and "participation in a training camp" forms.

"I don't understand. Does this have something to do with your loss in the student council election?"

As she said this, the club president nonchalantly moved in front of the cabinet. Surely she wasn't thinking that the first-year club member in front of her would force her way over to the cabinet and snatch a resignation form, so she was probably just trying to hide it from Touko's sight.

"No, it's for personal reasons."

She probably wasn't going to accept such a vague explanation. Typically, people would say it was for personal reasons when the actual reason was hard to say.

But, if she was asked if there was something concrete preventing her from doing club activities, Touko wouldn't be able to offer a clear answer.

She liked to act.

But, right now, practicing acting was hard on her. Her father wanted her to live her life as she pleased. But doing what she wanted made her feel guilty, like she was tearing her family apart.

And now her mother was mentally unstable on occasion. Touko wanted to reset things, and think them over more carefully next time.

But she couldn't quite find the words to express that.

"If you're not getting along with some of the older club members, I have some ideas about that."

"Huh? Ideas?"

It was hardly the first time that she wasn't getting along with some of the other members. But, alas, those seniors she didn't get along with weren't enough to make Touko leave the club.

"There's not much time before the third-years' send-off, so we've decided to split into three groups and perform three short scenes. You and me are doing a two-person play. What do you think? Doesn't that sound exciting?"

"Uh ... yeah."

Even though she planned on resigning, she was still getting a little excited. It wasn't just about this two-person play – deciding on a new program always got her heart pounding.

It was like setting some ingredients down in front of a chef and saying, "Why don't you make something with these?"

And then the rehearsals.

She liked the rehearsals too. Repeating the same scenes over and over, until she didn't know whether she was the chef or the ingredients, then serving it up in the actual performance as a piping hot meal. Here you go, eat my magnificent dish.

"Right now, I'm looking for a script that will suit you. One that will let you showcase your acting ability to its utmost – that's the sort of play I want us to do."

The club president's eyes shone as she spoke, and looking at her Touko thought, "She and I are the same." She loved drama, and was always focused on doing whatever it took to put on a good performance, doing whatever it took to ensure both the audience and the cast enjoyed themselves. That was probably why she got along with someone as socially maladjusted as Touko herself. Of course, she had her own talents too.

"You're doing all this for me ... "

But it would all be in vain if Touko resigned.

"Touko-chan. Even after I've stepped down, I want you to show up and participate in the drama club."

"Uh ... ?"

"I plan on taking entrance exams next year, so I'll be stepping down relatively early. When that happens, you may find yourself isolated within the club. So I thought that the day may come when you'd talk about quitting the club."

The club president let out a long sigh.

"Even on your own, you should have a part to play. Even if it annoys the other club members, you shouldn't have to hide your talent. That would be our drama club's loss, and I think it would be such a shame for you too. It'd be better if you were the next club president, and pulled everyone forwards. You could leave the boring management stuff to someone else, and focus on planning and production. Or devote yourself entirely to acting. However you want it to be. But stay in the club, and act. There's so much that the other club members can learn from you. That's why I don't want you to quit."

(Ahh –)

Even though she'd come to the clubhouse determined to quit, her heart was thumping with excitement at the vision of the future that the club president was painting.

How good would it be if that came to pass?

But it probably wouldn't turn out that well. Touko's relationship with the other club members wasn't particularly good by any standard. Even if the current second-years stepped down at the same time as the club president, it wasn't like it would all be settled then. She didn't have a wonderful relationship with her fellow first-year club members either.

Given that, this was a dream. An ephemeral dream, given to her by Maria-sama, as she resigned from the club.

"Therefore."

The club president said something completely unexpected.

"Be my petit soeur."

"Huh?"

Despite Touko's surprise, the club president kept talking.

"If you're the club president's petit soeur, you won't be as easy a target, right? Even next year, after I've stepped down, you'll still be the petit soeur of the former club president – the effect won't wear off that quickly."

Her speech came to a halt, as though it had been cut off mid-way through, or completely drowned out.

"But, I."

In that moment, Touko had no idea how to respond. She had never once considered the possibility of the club president being her onee-sama.

Looking at a floundering Touko, the club president suddenly smiled and asked:

"Fukuzawa Yumi-san?"

"Mm ... "

"I thought as much. You like Yumi-san, don't you?"

Touko couldn't answer that question.

"I can tell, because I'm always looking at you the way you're looking at Yumi-san."

Not answering was the same as providing an answer. Even so, Touko was afraid of putting it into words, of expressing that outwardly.

"Yumi-san's a wonderful person. So I thought it would be great if you could become her petit soeur and find your happiness that way. That's why I've never said anything until now. But every time you get close to Yumi-san, you get hurt and back away. It's strange. Even though she's always unarmed, never holding a knife or anything like that."

That was exactly right.

Yumi-sama wasn't at fault. Touko would flail around with the weapons she used for self-defense and end up slashing herself and shedding blood. And on occasion, she'd hurt her opponent too.

"I'm sure the problem lies with me."

"I know. It's true. If you don't change, you'll never be able to walk with Yumi-san."

She had no way to respond to that. There was no need to either.

The club president wasn't chastising Touko, or urging her on. She was simply looking at it from a step removed, and saying what she thought.

"But if it were that easy to change oneself, no-one would ever suffer."

The club president smiled. Touko smiled too. That was true.

But Touko didn't really know if she actually wanted to change herself.

"It's so painful watching you suffer."

The club president put her arm around Touko's shoulders and pulled her closer.

"Just forget about Yumi-san already. I'll look out for you."

Touko closed her eyes in that gentle embrace.

Life would probably be easier if she agreed. Nothing to worry about, nothing to yearn for. She would probably be able to lead a quiet life.

"... Touko-chan?"

However, Touko quietly extricated herself from the club president's inviting arms.

"I'm sorry."

She couldn't decide right now. There was no way she could choose the club president just to cut off all contact with Yumi-sama.

"I see."

The club president sighed, "I figured as much." Then she turned around and took a piece of paper out of one of the cabinet drawers.

"Here."

She was holding out a club resignation form.

"... President."

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying I recommend this, or even that I approve of it."

When Touko was reluctant to accept it, the club president folded the B5-sized piece of paper in half and forced it into her hand.

"Think of it like a charm. Then, when you feel up to it, carry it with you and come to club activities. You'll feel a bit better knowing you can quit at any time, right?"

Then the club president added, "I'll be waiting for you," which Touko gratefully accepted.

"Of course, you don't have to be mindful of me. When you want to use the form, use it. Although I'd be overjoyed if you didn't. But there are all sorts of "personal reasons.""

Then the club president sat down in her chair, and picked up the form she'd been working on earlier.

Touko bowed deeply and left the clubhouse.

Since it looked like the club president wanted to be alone – her face down, concentrating on the paperwork.

In that case, Touko thought that the sooner she disappeared the better.

Part 3

"Touko."

As she walked out the school gate, a voice from behind called her to a stop. Turning around, she saw her cousin Kashiwagi Suguru.



"What are you doing?"

"I'm lying in wait for you."

Suguru-onii-sama stopped leaning against the wall and stood up properly.

"I was worried you might have gone home already."

He said, "What a relief," and patted her head, but Touko shook him off and said, "Not that."

"Ah, you mean, what am I doing without my car?"

Touko couldn't understand why he was completely missing what she intended and responding with an absurdity.

"My car stands out so I left it behind. Especially in that gorgeous color."

"..."

Completely oblivious to the fact that he was just as conspicuous as his beloved car.

A black overcoat covering his tall body, a bright red scarf wrapped around his neck, worn-out boots peeking out from beneath his jeans. She didn't know what style of fashion this was, but the authentic sunglasses tied it all together wonderfully.

There were about eighteen girls over by the bus stop, and they kept glancing this way. Just then a bus pulled up and opened its door, but they showed no signs of getting on board.

"That sort of thing doesn't bother me. What I wanted to know was, why were you lying in wait for me – "

After saying this much, Touko had a sudden realization.

"Did something happen at home!?"

"Nothing's happened. Your mom's in fine health."

Examining her cousin's unconcerned face, Touko let out a sigh of relief.

"Okay. That's good."

On reflection, if there had been some sort of incident at home, her family

wouldn't have employed the clumsy technique of asking Suguru-onii-sama to wait for her outside the school gate, instead they would have contacted the school directly and asked them to keep her there so they could pick her up.

"I came to talk with you."

"Talk? With me?"

"Yeah."

Touko thought that, in that case, he was better off waiting for her at her home, instead of laying an ambush in this cold. Then, as though he could see exactly what she was thinking, he said: "Your parents would be worried if I went out of my way to visit you."

"I see."

It had been Suguru-onii-sama that had come to pick her up when she ran away from home. He'd also been the one to visit the Fukuzawa household to express their thanks.

Her mom and dad were undoubtedly grateful to him, but his presence would bring back memories of Touko running away from home. There hadn't been any problems when he'd brought over a souvenir from his ski trip, but if he made another visit to have a "talk" then her mom would probably be put on guard.

"And so? Where are we going to talk?"

Touko surveyed the area.

"I'm in my school uniform, so we can't go to a cafe near here."

That said, she couldn't exactly bring a young man onto the grounds of a girls' school either. She didn't know what he wanted to talk about, but it would be odd to suggest just standing there. And because Suguru-onii-sama hadn't driven here, if they were going to go somewhere else, they'd have to go by bus. She could just picture it – her and this "stranger" getting on the same bus as those girls who'd been looking at her questioningly – and it wasn't pretty.

"For now, let's walk."

"Walk?"

Suguru-onii-sama then immediately started walking, leaving behind a bewildered Touko.

"Where are we walking to?"

"Over there."

He said, looking over his shoulder, and Touko decided she had no choice but to follow after him.

The footpath alongside the busway wasn't wide enough for two people to walk abreast, so he probably wasn't intending to have their talk while walking.

Still not knowing what their final destination was, Touko followed along, her gaze fixed on her cousin's wide, jet-black coat.

Naturally, she knew the scenery that spread out on both sides of the street. Since she always looked at it from on the bus. But since her vantage point had changed, it all looked slightly off.

For example, she hadn't noticed the small Buddha statues on both sides of the road until now. Or the weathered advertisements on the telephone poles. Or how the street signs that served as bus stop markers differed from the neighborhood street signs.

But even though she knew these things today, that didn't necessarily mean that they would be useful to her in the future. Of course, this was unrelated to "broadening her acting ability." But even so, she was glad she had learned of them, instead of remaining ignorant. There was no reason behind it, just a feeling.

As they walked, Touko constructed a mental map of their route.

If they kept going straight ahead, they'd reach a family restaurant.

(Maybe that's where onii-sama's going.)

But in that case, he should have asked whether family restaurants were okay when Touko ruled out cafes.

Maybe there was a public park that Touko didn't know about in one of the side streets. They could sit on a bench and talk, but in this cold weather, and with dusk imminent, that seemed brutal. For one thing, it seemed too out of

character for Suguru-onii-sama.

In this manner, Touko focused her thoughts solely on what their destination could be. She didn't spare a thought for what he came to talk to her about. It could be her mother, or her grandfather's hospital. As an older relative, he probably had something he wanted to say.

"We're here."

Suguru-onii-sama stopped abruptly and Touko unintentionally rammed into his back.

"Here?"

"Yep, here."

It wasn't a family restaurant or a park. It was a completely ordinary parking garage.

"It can't be."

"But it is."

Suguru-onii-sama took his car keys out of his pocket and held them up at her eye level.

"I thought you left your car behind because it stands out?"

"It would stand out in front of a girls' school, so I left it here."

Smirking, Suguru-onii-sama entered the parking garage. Touko followed after him and, sure enough, their destination was where that familiar bright red car was parked.

"Come on, get in."

Touko's cousin opened the front passenger's door and urged her inside. She had no reason to refuse, and it was pretty cold, so she chose to obediently climb in.

She hesitated for a moment, worried that her uniform may be conspicuous in the front seat, but even if the school found out and she was reprimanded, they would also quickly discover that the driver was her cousin, plus it would be hard to have a conversation with the driver if she was in the back seat.

After settling into the driver's seat, her cousin took off his sunglasses and said:
"I'll take you home."

After paying the parking fee, the red car slipped out of the gate.

"So? What did you want to talk about?"

"There's something I wanted to ask you."

"Something you wanted to ask me?"

Not something he wanted to tell her? Touko considered this. In that case, he probably wasn't going to lecture her or advise her about something to do with home.

"My cousin, looking like he knows everything in the world, wants to ask me something?"

Touko chuckled, a tiny bit amused.

"Don't make fun. My knowledge is of no importance. There's a lot in this world that I don't know – a world full of things, in fact."

Tick, tick, tick. The car blinker beat out a steady rhythm.

"It's about what happened at Christmas."

Suguru-onii-sama said, while changing lanes. Touko's heart skipped a beat when she heard the word "Christmas."

"Why did you say those things to Yumi-chan?"

"Those things?"

Touko asked, after a slight pause, but of course she remembered. She didn't feel as though it was necessary for her to divulge these details. She didn't know how her cousin had found out about it. He may have been bluffing, to get her to reveal this information.

"I don't understand your feelings, Touko. You like Yumi-chan."

Since he said that, he probably knew the crux of the matter.

"Who told you?"

She asked, meaning about the events that happened on Christmas. Was it

Yumi-sama herself, or Sachiko-onee-sama, or perhaps one of the other guests at the Christmas party in the Rose Mansion.

At any rate, if Yumi-sama had told someone, then it probably stood to reason that it would have leaked to him sooner or later. There was no seal on peoples' mouths.

"Who told me?"

However, Suguru-onii-sama seemed to have misunderstood her question.

"I can see it in your face."

"You can see it in my face? That's not very persuasive."

The drama club president had said something similar.

(You like Yumi-san, don't you?)

Even so, that was only intuition. Without evidence, there could be no proof.

The traffic light ahead turned orange. Suguru-onii-sama pressed down on the brakes and gently came to a stop behind the car in front. Then a group of students on bikes crossed in front of them at the pedestrian crossing.

"Then let me ask you something. Why didn't you go to Canada last summer?"

"Huh?"

"You changed your plans when you heard Yumi-chan was going to the Ogasawara's holiday house."

"Who'd do that?"

She thought she could laugh off this unfounded rumor. But her cousin continued, unperturbed.

"I was just remembering something aunty told me. You declared you didn't want to go to Canada when you heard that Sacchan was taking her little sister to their villa. When I first heard that I thought you were jealous of Yumi-chan and wanted to go to the holiday home to interfere with them. But thinking about it now, I've changed my mind. You went because you were worried about Yumi-chan."

"What are – "

"You knew that the girls there were dangerous. That they didn't care when they were harassing someone."

Touko laughed. So idiotic.

"Is there something strange about me going to the holiday house?"

"Whether it was strange or not, you were worried. So much so that you couldn't jet off to a distant country."

The light turned green. The car slipped into gear.

The pair were silent for a little while. Touko didn't confirm or deny her cousin's theory, instead idly watching the flow of traffic around them and the cars coming towards them in the opposite lane.

After a couple hundred metres her cousin suddenly opened his mouth and said: " ... So that's it. You were afraid that Yumi-chan would suffer the same sort of bullying that you had."

Apparently that was the conclusion he'd drawn after thinking about it during their silence, for her cousin's profile was unusually terrifying.

"Was it Kyougoku, Ayanokouji, or Saionji? Who was it, when, and what did they say?"

"Onii-sama ... "

Touko felt fear. Her usually gentle and smiling cousin was now looking at something with furious anger.

"Onii-sama."

"I never noticed. Until the moment you ran away from home, I believed you didn't know a thing."

He stepped on the accelerator. Their speed rose. The gap to the car in front narrowed. If things kept going like this, Touko thought they were likely to crash into it.

"Onii-sama, I gotta pee!"

Touko screamed.

"Uh."

"Please, stop somewhere that has a bathroom! Ah, that fast food place is fine. They've got a parking lot. Come on, turn left, put the indicator on. Hurry."

"Uh, ahh."

Still in shock, her cousin followed Touko's instructions and turned left. As soon as the car had come to a temporary stop in the parking lot, she undid her seatbelt and climbed out.

"I'll be back after I've used the toilet, so find somewhere to park and wait for me."

In truth, she didn't need to go to the toilet. But that was the only excuse she could come up with to go to the fast food store.

Once inside, she asked one of the employees where the toilet was, then went in and washed her hands only. She hadn't noticed it, but they were drenched in sweat.

The cold water felt good.

Touko looked at her reflection in the mirror and took a deep breath.

The ringlets she was so proud of were somewhat in disarray, but she felt as though that was no big deal.

"I did think about getting you coffee."

Touko handed a take-away cup of cola to her cousin, who had been sitting alone in the car, with the engine off, waiting for her.

"No, this is fine. Good choice."

"It's because I wanted to drink it too."

Cola was something that she wasn't that familiar with – she only drank it about once a year. But when she got thirsty, she started to crave this sort of thing. If it was like that for Touko, it was probably even more so for Suguru-onii-sama.

Her excuse for buying the drink was that it felt awkward to go into a store just to use their toilet.

Touko wanted some time for her cousin to cool down. She thought they'd be

better off finishing their conversation now, while stopped, than ending up in another situation like before.

"That'll be 1000 yen."

"Talk about price gouging."

"If you don't want it, that's fine. I can drink two."

Suguru-onii-sama quickly took a sip through the straw, then fished a 1000 yen note out of his wallet and offered it to her, saying, "Here."

"This tastes good."

"Yeah."

Then they drank their cola in silence for a little while.

"Touko."

"What?"

"Thanks for before ... if you hadn't made me stop, it could have turned dangerous."

He'd returned to his usual self.

"Thanks to you too. I made it to the toilet in time."

"That so?"

"Yep."

Touko nodded, and Suguru-onii-sama patted her on the head. Paying no attention to her hairdo. But his large hand felt good, so she didn't shake him off.

After drinking his cola, Suguru-onii-sama removed the plastic lid and poured the ice into his mouth. The sound of quiet crunching echoed around the car.

"Onii-sama."

"Mm?"

"It wasn't that big a shock to me."

The sound of crunching ice stopped momentarily.

"Not really. I already knew before they said that to me anyway."

Touko didn't know what had caused it, but one summer those three girls started harassing her. They were probably jealous about some trivial matter – like Sachiko-onee-sama giving her something because they were relatives, or the pair of them going shopping together.

But Touko wasn't particularly interested in being friends with those three girls. They probably would have been satisfied if she'd cried and said, "Please let's be friends," but since she didn't, they'd avoided visiting her for a couple of days.

Then one day one of them came over, looking triumphant. She prefaced what she was saying with, "My mom told me not to say anything because it's so sad for Touko-san." The girl tried her best to look compassionate, but as she talked it was obvious that her eyes, lips and nostrils – every part of her face – was filled with glee.

"And when I responded with, "So what?" her face went bright red and she looked furious. But that was a long time ago. I've even forgotten who it was. That's why – "

Touko looked straight at Suguru-onii-sama.

"You don't have to get angry on my behalf, onii-sama."

"Touko ... "

Suguru-onii-sama mumbled, before lapsing into silence. The shock he'd received had retreated, but he still looked like he was searching for the right words to say.

Eventually, he crushed his take-away cup and said:

"I just want you to be happy."

"About what?"

As she asked, she slurped the last of her cola through the straw. Some of the ice had melted, which thinned the flavor.

"It may just be my imagination, but it looks to me like you run away from the happiness that's right in front of you. Like with Yumi-chan – "

"That's already over. There's no point rehashing it."

Touko interrupted him loudly. He seemed a bit surprised but quickly smiled and agreed.

"Okay, I'll stop."

He turned the key and the engine came to life. Touko returned the cups to the bag they were in when she bought them. One was completely empty so it was tossed in casually. The other was placed upright, so the melting ice wouldn't leak out. After fastening her seatbelt, the car moved forwards slowly.

They turned left out of the fast-food car park and returned to the bus route. Suguru-onii-sama gave the car that let them in a friendly toot of the horn and they gradually picked up speed.

Joining the flow of cars.

Each car was moving separately, and had their own driver, but it brought to mind the image of a bamboo-leaf boat floating down a river.

Suguru-onii-sama didn't speak, but he wasn't focused solely on driving. It looked like he wasn't going to say anything because Touko had cut short their conversation.

With their talk over, her thoughts turned in on themselves. The words that her cousin said about "Yumi-chan" ran through her head like a refrain.

Like with Yumi-chan.

Like with Yumi-chan.

Like with Yumi-chan –

Unable to stand it any longer, Touko opened her mouth.

"So, you're saying I should have accepted her rosary back then? There's no way I could have done that."

She brought it up again, even though she had said there was no point rehashing it.

Her cousin stayed silent and drove. For a full ten seconds, he seemed to be slowly piecing together what to say.

" – You're saying ... Yumi-chan chose you as her petit soeur?"

"Why are you acting all surprised now?"

After he'd chastised her for it.

"I had no idea. I knew something happened between you and Yumi-chan at Christmas, but I didn't know the details. So I bluffed, and went fishing for info."

"That's such an obvious lie."

Obviously, he'd heard this from Sachiko-onee-sama. But despite that, he was pretending that this was the first time he'd heard about it.

"Why are you so suspicious of other people?"

"Should I believe everyone? If they're just going to betray me, it's better not to believe them in the first place."

Touko screeched hysterically.

"You're wrong. You say you don't believe, but deep in your heart you want to. You run away, but then you wait for them to chase after you."

"Yeah, right."

They overtook a bus parked at the bus stop.

"But if you keep running away like this, eventually they'll get tired and no-one will chase after you."

Touko was enraged by this and shouted, "Stop!" But her cousin didn't comply with her wishes.

"You were the one that brought it up, and now you're getting all angry."

She knew that.

"I'm feeling carsick. You're driving too aggressively."

She was in the wrong. But even so, she wanted to deflect the blame.

"Wha – everyone's been saying I've got a lot better recently."

He muttered to himself, sounding senile, but he didn't show any sign of slowing down or turning off the road.

"Whatever, hurry up and stop. I'll get on that bus over there."

She looked back over her shoulder, and the bus that she thought they'd just passed was already tiny.

"No can do."

Her cousin wasn't giving in to Touko's selfishness.

"I'll throw up."

"Fine. You can take the cups out of the bag and use that."

"Alright, I will."

She wanted to get back at her unkind cousin so she thought she would throw up, and raised the bag to her mouth – but since she wasn't actually feeling carsick that wasn't so easy to do. Her stomach had its own thoughts on the matter.

"You don't understand what I'm feeling."

With tears in her eyes, and without vomiting, she lowered the bag. The ice that had melted into water, and the still frozen ice, made a soft sound as it sloshed around.

"You're right. I said that before, didn't I? I don't understand your feelings, Touko."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"I know. Then, what? You want sympathy from me?"

She got goosebumps just imagining it – "Ah, how sad. What a poor little child."

"That would be the one thing I'd hate the most."

"I'll bet. That's why you've been frantically putting on this performance."

There was no doubt that he was antagonizing her. But even when he was antagonizing her, it still felt good to know that someone understood her mind.

This person understood. Therefore, she didn't have to wear a mask in front of them.

"Everybody's criticizing me."

"People other than me have said something to you?"

Touko nodded and her cousin said:

"I'm sure it's because they love you."

"They criticize me because they love me? I don't get it."

Touko sighed, then looked out the window. At some point their car had turned off the bus route and was now driving down a highway.

She wasn't going to get on a train, so they weren't going to the train station. In the end, it looked like she was going to get driven home in Suguru-onii-sama's car.

Nothing she could do about that.

Even though she'd finished compulsory education, she was still a helpless child.

Even though she'd run away from home, she was still a naive little girl with no way to support herself, and had to return home after half a day, and she was treated like an outsider with regards to her grandfather's hospital.

She could cry and stamp her feet, but she couldn't change anything.

But despite all this, she was being told to do her best to find happiness?

Even though she'd brought misfortune on those around her by thinking only of herself?

Could that really be called happiness?

"That's true."

Suguru-onii-sama suddenly laughed.

"There's a world full of things that you don't understand."

They left the freeway and entered a residential area.

She could see the stars between familiar buildings.

The stars looked like they were laughing too.

"What I don't understand is, why would my cousin go out of his way to ambush me, and drive me all the way home?"

Touko asked, as the car slowed down. Very soon now, the Matsudaira house would pop into view.

"I told you, I wanted to talk to you."

"Yeah. But what I want to know is, was our conversation really worth that much to you?"

"It was. I struck gold."

Touko pondered whether this was true or not as she undid her seatbelt. She didn't want her parents to read too much into it, so she didn't invite Suguru-onii-sama in. For the same reason, Touko left the fast food bag in his car. He'd have to take that with him back to his home, but there was no helping that.

Touko picked up her bag and exited the car. She didn't think the sound would carry over this distance, but she closed the door as softly as possible, so as not to disturb her mother in the house.

She walked around past the driver's seat and Suguru-onii-sama said: "I just wanted to find out what happened with you and Yumi-chan."

"... Why would you want to know that?"

Touko looked puzzled.

"If you think about it hard enough, I'm sure you'll understand."

The red car slipped quietly away, down the suburban street.

From this distance, it looked like a toy car.

The stars twinkled.

"If I think about it ... "

Touko mumbled, then turned towards home and started walking.

It seemed unbelievable that all her earlier sweating, arguing and screaming had taken place in such a tiny box.

Even though she was so small, she was worrying about becoming an adult.

The stars would undoubtedly find this amusing.

– Such were her thoughts.

In Her Pocket

Part 1

School life could be viewed as a connected series of events. After Christmas came the winter break, then when the third term started in the new year it was the election for the next student council. As soon as that was over, it was Valentine's Day.

She realized during cleaning time, as she swept the classroom floor, that the gathered dust and particles were a lot more colorful than usual.

At first she hadn't paid it any attention, thinking that it was just a one-time event. However, it was the same the following day, and as the days progressed it somehow kept increasing.

Typically, it was things that were too small to carry to the bin that were left on the floor – mainly dirt brought in from outside and strands of hair. So when she swept the floor, the whitish, blackish and grayish particles would form a small monochrome mound.

But recently, there were reddish, yellowish, greenish, and all sorts of different colored specks of fiber mixing together, not forming any single shade.

What was going on there?

After peering at the dustpan for a little while, she finally understood the meaning behind the colors.

(Ah.)

They were fibers from the wool her classmates were knitting with during

breaks.

But even so, would knitting alone make these dustballs? Well, it wasn't completely impossible. If there were some students that were frequently undoing and redoing their knitting, and some that were using fluffy mohair yarn. If about a third of her class were knitting things for Valentine's Day, it would probably result in about that amount of dust.

And some of their friends who weren't knitting would borrow some yarn and play cat's cradle, so the first-year camellia class was swimming in wool fibers.

Conversations about chocolate were springing up all over the place. Students getting together to look through recipe books and writing down ingredients for sweets, or poring over the catalogs from famous confectionery shops in their magazines. Everyone was having fun, whether they had an onee-sama or not.

It was their long-awaited high-school Valentine's Day. It was probably more strange not to be enjoying it.

After school on Saturday.

With the cleaning finished, and her hands washed, she went to take her handkerchief out of her pocket and something else came flying out with it and landed on the floor. After picking it up and unfolding it, she saw that it was the special edition of the Lillian Kawaraban that had been distributed that morning. Touko smiled. She'd completely forgotten that she had it in her pocket.

"It's on again – the Treasure Hunt!"

The headline jumped out at her.

But despite the sense of urgency in the announcement, there were hardly any details provided. When she'd first read it, she thought that the newspaper was planning on releasing the information little by little in order to drum up enthusiasm, but apparently they hadn't settled on the final details.

"Mami-sama said they'd publish the rules as soon as they were decided."

Noriko had explained at lunch time, while trying to escape her classmates.

Noriko's life had become a lot more hectic since the student council elections. Of course, some of that was Yamayurikai council work, but her classmates would

also gather around her during breaks to ask her about the upcoming events.

As a result, for the last few days, Noriko gave the impression of always rushing from one place to another. There was no end to the people she had to deal with. Just what on earth had happened to the "Unapproachable Noriko-san" from the start of the school year?

Thinking about it, Touko grimaced.

It was the same with her – "Touko-san the innocent meddler" was a thing of the past too.

At some point they'd swapped.

No. It wasn't like they'd switched roles. They'd both gradually changed over time, until they'd finally settled like this.

"Treasure hunt ... huh."

Touko returned the paper to her right pocket. Her hand remained there, in her pocket.

She hadn't been able to participate in last year's treasure hunt because she'd been in middle-school. She'd declined her classmates' invitation to race over there as soon as school was over and had pretended to go home, but then curiosity got the better of her and she had walked over to the high-school area. And then –

(What an idiot.)

From inside her pocket came the sound of the newspaper being crushed. It was no longer folded in four, it was now just a paper ball.

(What an idiot.)

She walked quickly down the hallway. Like she was trying to shake off the ghosts of the past. Why did she have to remember that scene?

(What an idiot, what an idiot, what an idiot, what an idiot!)

She ran and ran, but it just kept chasing her.

The image of that girl running through the school, exactly one year ago. Her desperate expression as she ran, pursued by those other girls. But, the way it

was framed, she looked like the lead racehorse, pursued by the rest of the field.

That girl was the one that Sachiko-onee-sama had chosen.

Touko thought it was frightening. But she didn't understand what it was she feared. She was just vaguely scared. She couldn't get close to that person.

(It's hopeless ...)

The more she tried to shake it off, the more the vision of Yumi-sama remained. Touko gave up and slowed down. Before she knew it, she was back at the first-year camellia classroom.

"Well then, gokigenyou everyone."

A voice called out from within the classroom, then Noriko emerged.

"Ah, Touko."

Noriko said cheerfully, spotting her friend.

"You look busy, are you on your way to the Rose Mansion?"

"Nope. There's no meeting today. I'm in a hurry because there's a special on Buddhist statues on TV today and I forgot to set the recorder. Unfortunately, my great-aunt's out today too. Well, I wouldn't really want to rely on her anyway."

It wasn't clear whether she didn't want to bother her great-aunt, or she didn't think she'd be able to work the machine.

"What time's it on?"

"Umm ... two, I think."

"Then you'd better hurry."

Looking at her watch, Touko saw it was already well past 1pm. She remembered that Noriko's house was a couple of stops away on the train from M Station. If she didn't have to wait too long for the train she could still make it home in time, but the bus from school was often late so she couldn't be too careless.

"Yeah. Well, gokigenyou."

Noriko turned to go.

"Ah, Noriko-san."

Touko called out instinctively.

"Huh? What is it?"

Touko had put the cart before the horse, calling out to her before she'd thought about what she should say. But she'd called her to stop on reflex. Perhaps it had just felt wrong for Noriko to say something completely trivial like that, since usually they had weighty conversations when it was just the two of them.

"It must be tough on you. You have to hide one of the treasures this year, right?"

Sad to say, what came out of her mouth was the same sort of thing that her classmates had said when they crowded around Rosa Gigantea en bouton.

"Nope."

Noriko smiled as she denied this.

"The three second-years are hiding the cards. Ah, right. I think I've got one ... "

As she said this, Noriko put her hand in her pocket and fished something out.

"See, it says "next year's Roses," right?"

What she'd retrieved from her pocket was the special edition of the Lillian Kwaraban. Noriko explained as she pointed to the article.

"Last year it was the boutons, so it seems like a lot of people made that mistake. Do you have one of these?"

"... No."

"Then you can have this. I've already read it, and we should have one on file at the Rose Mansion, so I could read that any time."

Noriko refolded it and pressed it into Touko's left hand, before saying, "Catch you later," and quickly disappearing down the hallway.

After returning to her classroom, Touko wondered why she had just accepted another copy of the Lillian Kwaraban when she already had a copy. On her desk, she placed the copy she'd just received next to the crumpled copy from her

pocket.

(This is Noriko, this is Touko.)

She tapped each of them, and then put both of them in her pocket.

There was nothing else she could do.

Because, at that time, she absolutely did not want Noriko to see that crumpled piece of paper.

Part 2

As she walked along the hall leading to the shoe boxes, Touko spotted someone coming the other way that had also finished their preparations to leave for the day.

"Oh?"

It was her normal voice, so this was neither a dream nor a phantom. She walked over to the motionless Touko, smiled and said, "Gokigenyou."

In this way, Fukuzawa Yumi-sama came to a stop in front of Touko, like a miracle.

(What is this?)

Touko smiled bitterly.

She thought she'd finally rid herself of that ghost chasing after her, but now they'd run into each other here. It caught her off guard.

But, thinking back, Noriko had left her with the hint that there was no meeting at the Rose Mansion today. Although, even with that hint, she couldn't have predicted this exact outcome.

Yumi-sama was by herself. Neither her onee-sama, Sachiko-sama, nor her classmate Shimazu Yoshino-sama were with her. She'd just randomly decided to head home on her own.

"Gokigenyou."

Touko smiled sweetly. That sort of expression was her specialty.

"Are you heading home now, Touko-chan?"

"Yeah."

Touko thought that was a rather idiotic question to ask someone wearing their coat and holding their schoolbag. But, in truth, Touko was the idiotic one.

"Then let's go together."

Yumi-sama said.

" ... Uh."

They were right next to the shoe lockers and she'd said she was heading home. At this point it was too late to make some excuse about why they'd be leaving at different times, like she had to go to the library, or there was something she had to buy from the school shop.

The first-and second-year lockers were in different locations, so if she made a run for it after changing shoes there was a chance she'd get away.

But what would happen if she did that? It would just be compounding her idiocy.

The image of her frantically sprinting down the path past the library was too ridiculous.

Touko resigned herself to her fate and started walking.

She waited at the entrance doorway until Yumi-sama finally arrived.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting."

Indeed, she'd been kept waiting. For a lot longer than it would typically take to change one's shoes.

"Let's go."

"Okay."

Touko looked back in the direction from which Yumi-sama had come. She couldn't see anyone that Yumi-sama could have been talking to.

"You know."

Walking half a step ahead, Yumi-sama mumbled.

"I wanted a chance to talk to you alone, Touko-chan. But I didn't know how you would feel about that. I've been holding back from visiting the first-year camellia classroom because it might cause problems for you."

Yumi-sama looked back over her shoulder at Touko.

"So, I'm overjoyed that we ran into each other just now."

" _ "

At that moment, a thought crossed Touko's mind – Yumi-sama had taken her time just to give Touko a chance to run away.

Touko eyed the path they were walking along. Running as hard as she could, it would take her about this long to cover the distance from the entrance way to the corner of the library.

So this girl would have been fine if Touko had run off. Probably.

(Or maybe she'd have preferred I ran.)

That wasn't right.

The smile she'd had when she said she was overjoyed they met had not been fake.

First of all, if she hadn't wanted to walk home with Touko, she wouldn't have asked when they'd met. There was no need for something so circuitous.

No matter how much she thought about it, she wouldn't get an answer. Touko gave up and asked a question: "What did you intend to say to me when we met?"

It was the first time they'd been alone together since last Christmas.

Back then, Touko had been agitated by the sudden offer of the rosary and harshly rejected Yumi-sama.

Touko had resigned herself to hearing a couple of complaints about this now that there was no-one else around.

However.

"What indeed? I don't know. There wasn't anything I explicitly wanted to say, it was just a vague feeling. It's like, there's so many boxes to open, I don't know where to start."

Yumi-sama's answer was as vague as she'd described, containing nothing even slightly relevant.

"Anyway, you know how you call out to your friends, even if you have nothing

specific to talk about? It's like, well, since you're here, but then you try and think about why you want them to stay, and you don't know."

"..."

She didn't know?

A short time ago, Touko had succumbed to that same emotion when she called out to Noriko.

So did that mean that Yumi-sama was feeling the same way towards Touko that Touko had felt earlier?

They turned the corner past the library.

"Touko-chan."

Yumi-sama opened a box and presented the words inside to Touko.

"My bad for putting you on the spot."

But Touko had no idea what she was being put on the spot about.

What had Yumi-sama done to her that warranted an apology? Shouldn't Touko have been the one saying "My bad." Of course, with Lillian's strict seniority system, she wouldn't say something as informal as "my bad" to a senior.

"I didn't think about it. I offered you my rosary before even thinking about it. There were a lot of things I should have thought about – your feelings, whether it was the right circumstances, all sorts of things – before I asked. But I got carried away by my own emotions. So it's only natural that you were shocked."

So that was what led Yumi-sama to say, "My bad." But, if those were her true feelings, then she couldn't be said to have made any progress at all.

Because, right now, Yumi-sama was driving the conversation without considering Touko at all. If she had thought about it, she would know that Touko would rather not have this conversation.

"So, this has been an apology. Next I'm going to make a proposal – can we return our relationship to how it was prior to Christmas?"

"Huh!?"

"I hate this awkward relationship we have now. Ah, but don't worry, I'm not

going to force my rosary on you. But, like, could we greet each other warmly if we passed in the corridor? Or stop and have a pointless chat in the hallway? Ah, right. Could you come and visit us at the Rose Mansion again – "

"I don't understand what you're thinking."

Touko cut in, unable to stand this optimistic "proposal."

"Why are you so indulgent of an underclassman who rejected you?"

"Indulgent? That's not it."

Seeing those blank eyes looking back at her, Touko momentarily doubted her grasp of the Japanese language. Why was it that conversations would go like this when they shared the same language?

"First of all, why would you even consider making this fool your petit soeur?"

That was what Touko had wanted to ask when she was offered the rosary. But she'd been afraid of the answer, so she'd swallowed the question.

"Can you stop demeaning yourself like that?"

Yumi-sama's expression hardened slightly.

""This fool" is just fine for this fool."

"You said it again."

"It's got nothing to do with you, right? I'm just talking about myself."

"It does have something to do with me. You're the one I chose as my petit soeur. I don't want you to be arbitrarily devaluing yourself."

But that meant she didn't have that value originally. Why couldn't Yumi-sama understand that?

"I interpreted Yumi-sama's offer of her rosary at that time as a fantasy. And I accepted it as such. So all this talk of soeurs should be over. So why do you still care about me?"

Touko glared at Yumi-sama.

"You don't know?"

Yumi-sama stopped walking and looked calmly at Touko as she asked this. As

though to say, "You really don't know?"

She didn't know.

She was afraid of knowing.

At this moment, Yumi-sama was looking straight at Touko alone. Like she was drawing her in.

In truth, Touko knew.

For whatever reason, she knew the answer Yumi-sama had prepared.

But Touko just couldn't believe it. That was why she couldn't take the offered hand. She couldn't leap into those outspread arms.

"You know, ever since you turned me down, I've been thinking about it."

Yumi-sama resumed walking. Touko followed along after her.

"Wondering what would happen between me and Touko-chan."

They walked along the path lined with ginkgo trees, just half a step separating them.

"But then I thought I should think about what I wanted to happen between us, rather than wonder about what would happen. Since then, that's what I've been thinking about."

Touko had no obligation to follow her like this. She didn't have to silently listen to her talk. She could just say, "That's enough," and stop walking.

But Touko followed her. She had to confirm her suspicious about where Yumi-sama's speech was going.

"Ultimately, I'll be happy as long as Touko-chan is Touko-chan."

Yumi-sama stopped walking before Touko did. They had arrived at the statue of Maria-sama.

"As long as I'm me."

This phrase didn't exactly make Touko feel happy. But Yumi-sama didn't notice Touko-chan's subtle shift in expression, because she had her head bowed in prayer.

"So while I'd be delighted to be your soeur, it seems like you don't value that, perhaps seeing it as a prison."

Yumi-sama opened her eyes and turned around. Touko had forgotten to pray, repeating a single phrase over and over.

"You said, "As long as I'm me – ""

Her hands were shaking. She knew she shouldn't dig too deeply into this topic. But now that the lid had been opened, she just had to look inside. There was no way she couldn't.

"That's right. So no matter what you do, my feelings won't change. If you don't want to tell me the real reason you ran in the student council election, I won't force it out of you. If that's the conclusion you came to after careful deliberation, then it must have been important to you. Same with why you ran away from home. And other things, like what sort of people your parents are, what kind of childhood you had, what your relationship with them is like now – all those are completely separate to the feelings I have for you, Touko-chan."

As she listened to Yumi spout her pet theory, Touko's temper flared.

Parents, childhood, relationship. How could this person talk so innocently to Touko about these things?

"So that's it?"

Ah, she knew it.

"So that's how it is?"

"Huh?"

"As long as I'm me? It has nothing to do with my parents? I knew it had to be something like that."

Still silent, her eyes glistened. She hadn't realized her own mistake yet.

"I don't know how long you've known, but I knew it had to be pity that made you offer me your rosary at that moment. You just wanted to pay a visit to Sara^[1] on Christmas Eve. Oh how happy you must have felt when you held out your rosary."

Even so, for a moment she'd wanted to believe, like an idiot.

On that Christmas Eve.

It had been here, right in front of Maria-sama.

"I thought it was strange. There was no way Yumi-sama would want this fool as her petit soeur. But, finally, the mystery is solved."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you're not willing to admit it, it's going to make it hard to move forwards."

"Hey, isn't this some sort of misunderstanding?"

Yumi-sama took a step towards Touko.

"Stay away from me!"

Touko screamed with all her might.

"Don't come any closer!"

"Touko-chan."

"I don't want to hear any of your excuses."

Maintaining a distance of about a metre between them, they looked at each other.

"Alright."

Eventually, Yumi-sama started to speak.

"It looks like your blood's boiling, so no matter what I say you won't hear."

With that, Yumi-sama turned her back and walked away from Touko. One metre became two, then when she was about three metres away, she looked back over her shoulder like she'd forgotten something and said: "Touko-chan. Stay there and count to 100. No moving until you're done."

Then she kept walking.

Without knowing why, Touko followed those directions and counted, "One, two." Even as she wondered why she should follow the orders of someone she was rebelling against, she followed them because of the power of those words.

Her blood was indeed boiling. And her mind was rattled. She couldn't think about things properly. She didn't know what would mess things up, or what was the right thing to do.

In that unsettled state of mind, it was easier to follow someone else's instructions. Even if they came from someone who was tricking her into doing something she found unpleasant. Although, obviously, counting to 100 was a simple and harmless task, so she had no qualms there.

"Twenty-three, twenty-four."

She hadn't been told to close her eyes, but at some point her eyelids had fastened shut. Now, Touko was "it" in a game of hide-and-seek.

"Forty-nine, fifty."

Part way through her legs became unsteady, so she crouched down.

"Seventy-six, seventy-seven, seventy-eight."

The numbers were born and then disappeared. In the beginning, there were all these malevolent thoughts wrapped around her mind as the numbers visited one by one. But now, there was only the numbers there. The numbers flowed in an orderly fashion.

"Ninety-one, ninety-two."

Her boiling blood had cooled considerably.

"One hundred."

Touko opened her eyes.

She looked around, but couldn't see Yumi-sama anywhere.

The only one there was Maria-sama.

Part 3

After counting to 100 on the spot, she felt like she'd calmed down a little bit.
Just a little bit.

While her boiling blood had gradually cooled, the waves of anger, sadness, disillusionment and despair that had accompanied it did not also disappear.

The thing she hated most was pity.

So she couldn't stand the thought of becoming a petit soeur due to pity. How could someone who didn't understand that ever think of being her onee-sama? It was unbelievable.

She'd reached 100 a while ago. But still Touko remained rooted to the spot.

Touko looked towards the school gate, where Yumi-sama would probably have disappeared to. She saw a group of university students walking together.

She could follow along behind them. Then get on a bus, then a train, and arrive home.

But once she arrived home, she'd have to deal with the fact she had nowhere to go. Her only option would be to crawl into bed and cry.

Rejecting that, Touko turned towards the school buildings. The way things were, she wouldn't be able to contain her anger.

Even if it didn't change the situation, there was something she had to say.

(I wonder if she's still here.)

Touko looked at her watch. 1:30.

Her target may have already left a long time ago. In that case, all Touko could do was confirm that and head home. She retraced her footsteps.

Touko walked back alone along the path she had earlier taken with Yumi-sama.

She passed some girls that looked like third-years, but none of them were the girl she was looking for.

She made her way to the third-year shoe-box area and had a look inside one of the lockers. Sure enough, there was a pair of outdoors shoes in there. This was proof that her target was still at school.

(Noriko said there wasn't a meeting at the Rose Mansion today.) Touko headed for the third-year classrooms.

She heard voices coming from inside the third-year pine classroom. It seemed as though there were a few students still there.

"Pardon me."

Touko flung the door open, not waiting for a response to her knock.

Five girls turned to look at her simultaneously. Her target was one of them.

"Touko-chan ... "

The third-years inside were puzzled by this younger girl who had thrown open the door and then stopped moving, like a toy with its batteries removed. One of them came forward and stood in front of her. Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.

"Whatever is the matter?"

"We have to talk."

That was all she said, but Sachiko-sama obviously inferred something and gave a small nod. Then she briefly returned to the group of students, gathered her belongings, said, "I'll leave you here," and exited the classroom.

"Yeah. Gokigenyou."

"Thanks for helping us out."

Sachiko-onee-sama's classmates said their various farewells.

"Is that alright?"

Touko asked, worried that she'd interrupted something. There had been sheets of paper spread across the desks, like they'd been working on something.

"Yeah, it was just the non-entrance-exam cleaning group. We'd already

finished and were reading magazines."

As she said this, she shifted her school bag to the side and fastened her coat buttons.

"I don't know what you want to talk about, but this doesn't seem like the right place, wouldn't you agree?"

Touko nodded slightly.

In winter, after most of the students had gone home for the day, the halls echoed more than expected. That said, they weren't about to go back to the third-year pine classroom, and the specialty classrooms were either locked or had people in them.

They walked out into the courtyard.

The air was cold, but with a coat it wasn't too cold to bear. More importantly, their voices wouldn't bounce off the walls or windows or ceilings, so they didn't have to worry about being overheard. The words they spoke here would be picked up by the wind and carried off into the sky.

"Have you been talking to Yumi-sama?"

Touko started by asking this question.

"About what?"

Sachiko-sama asked, sounding confused. But Touko ignored this and continued.

"Didn't you say something about how you weren't going to interfere in Yumi-sama's choice of a petit soeur?"

"Certainly, I may have said something along those lines."

Sachiko-onee-sama smiled as her long hair flowed in the breeze.

"And? What do you think I've been saying to Yumi?"

She asked quietly, as though she had no idea whatsoever.

"Well."

Touko was struggling for words. Even though it related to herself, she had

considerable resistance to saying it out loud.

"Just say it. It's obvious you've come to complain to me about something, but Yumi and I have all sorts of conversations every day. I won't know which one of those has apparently offended you if you don't tell me."

Now that she'd said this there was no other option. Touko firmed her resolve and began to speak.

"About my birth."

"Your birth?"

For a moment, Sachiko-onee-sama's expression changed. It was the look of someone who had just remembered something.

"There, I knew you'd remember it."

Touko was convinced. Sachiko-onee-sama's failure to respond didn't change that at all.

"So? When did you tell Yumi-sama?"

Was it just before Christmas, or even earlier than that? It probably wouldn't change the current situation, but Touko desperately wanted to know.

When did Yumi-sama start looking at her with pity? That was a very important question to Touko.

But Sachiko-onee-sama made no allusion to that. Instead, she repeated her question.

"What would I even tell Yumi about your birth?"

Acting like that at this point in the game? Annoyed, Touko spat it out.

"Don't play dumb. Obviously that I'm not the Matsudaira's child!"

The moment she heard this, Sachiko-onee-sama's expression froze. Touko knew. This was surprise.

"Touko-chan ... you're not the baby that Mrs Matsudaira gave birth to?"

Those black pupils started back at her, unblinking. Touko put herself on guard.

"No way."

"I'm afraid to say, this is the first I've heard about this."

"There's no way that's true."

She found it hard to believe that Sachiko-onee-sama hadn't heard about it.

Saionji or Ayanokouji or whoever knew about it three years ago. So how could the heiress to the Ogasawara family, who held the most power among their relatives and lived in Tokyo to boot, make it to this age without knowing about it?

But Touko had felt it earlier. Sachiko-onee-sama had been shocked by Touko's words. There was no way that was an act.

"Then why did you look like you'd just remembered something before?"

Wasn't it strange? It was her first time hearing it, but she remembered something.

"I simply remembered Suguru-san asking some leading questions."

"Suguru-onii-sama ... ?"

Touko asked, and Sachiko-onee-sama looked up at the sky and laughed.

"I'm sure he was trying to determine whether or not I knew. He asked me if I remembered anything from when you were born."

"And you said?"

"I told him I didn't remember. That's the truth. I couldn't answer any more than that."

Her story was too concrete for an on-the-spot lie. Plus Suguru-onii-sama was given to asking leading questions.

"So then who was it?"

Suguru-onii-sama hadn't been talking to Yumi-sama. That much was obvious from their conversation the other day.

"Honestly, acting so high and mighty."

Sachiko-onee-sama muttered.

"My deepest apologies."

Touko humbly apologized. It had been a misunderstanding to think that Sachiko-onee-sama had leaked the details of her birth to Yumi-sama.

"Not to me. To Yumi."

Her muttered words were ice cold.

"I don't know what's happened between you and Yumi, but I'm certain that Yumi knows nothing about your family situation. Even if she somehow found out, that wouldn't change her opinion of you one iota. As her onee-sama, I know that better than anyone."

Touko couldn't respond to that. No, at that moment, she couldn't even think.

She stood frozen to the spot, still unable to find any words. Sachiko-onee-sama looked straight into Touko's eyes for a short while, but then she finally looked away.

Perhaps she couldn't stand to look at Touko any longer. Or maybe she just caught sight of her own reflection in one of the school building windows.

Eventually, the corners of her lips crept upwards and she said: "Even so, how sad for Yumi, who's only ever been thinking of you."

Unable to bear the weight of those words, Touko fell to her knees on the grass.

Just suppose that it had all been a misunderstanding – what should she do?

How could she take back those words that she'd repeatedly hurled at Yumi-sama?

Sachiko-onee-sama's indoor shoes departed from Touko's side. She could hear the crunching of the dry grass carried on the wind.

Sachiko-onee-sama had entered the school building. This was happening behind her so she couldn't confirm it with her eyes, but she could still tell.

Left all alone, Touko remained crouched in the courtyard.

Sachiko-onee-sama's anger was understandable. Touko had wounded Yumi-sama's pride, and that of her onee-sama.

So, obviously, she wouldn't want to stay with Touko.

But, at that moment, it pained Touko to be alone. She wanted someone,

anyone, by her side.

On her own, she had no idea what she should do.

"One, two, three ... "

For now, she tried counting. That was the good luck charm that Yumi-sama had taught her, to calm herself.

"Eleven, twelve."

Maybe once she'd counted to one hundred, she'd have regained some composure.

She didn't know. So she thought she'd give it a try.

Maybe "it" wouldn't find those hiding, when it opened its eyes after counting to one hundred.

(Eventually they'll get tired and no-one will chase after you.) The words of Suguru-onii-sama intruded upon her counting.

She'd lashed out at anyone and everyone once she started suspecting them, so maybe no-one would ever want to be around her again.

"Thirty-eight ... thirty-nine."

At that moment, Touko was completely isolated.

Everyone came into the world alone. So she believed that humans were supposed to live on their own.

Soon after she was born, she was put in the care of her adoptive parents. As a result, she'd made it to here. Humans were surprisingly tough.

"Forty-five."

But maybe she really was an incredibly weak creature.

Even as she tore apart the bonds tying her to others, one after the other, she found it intolerably lonely.

It was exactly like Suguru-onii-sama had said.

Even as she said she didn't believe it, she really wanted to believe – making light of those that chased her as she ran from one place to another.

So now that she was completely and utterly alone, that was just her paying for her own mistakes.

"Fifty-six."

Nobody would complain if all the friends they'd been playing with had disappeared when they opened their eyes.

"Sixty-four."

Even so, she wouldn't know until she'd finished counting. Until she opened her eyes, she wouldn't know if everyone had really vanished.

"Seventy."

As the numbers grew, Touko became scared of counting. When she reached one hundred, she'd have to open her eyes.

When she opened her eyes, she would no doubt find that she was all alone in the school courtyard.

She was scared of counting.

But since she'd started, she had to finish counting to 100.

"Eighty-one."

At that moment, Touko felt something on her shoulder.

A gentle warmth. Touko knew it was a human hand and she instinctively opened her eyes.

"Ah, sorry."

The owner of that hand was someone quite unexpected.

"I thought I shouldn't interfere, but I didn't know how long you were going to keep going and it was kind of an accident ... So, what happened?"

Smiling innocently at her was Noriko.



"How?"

Hadn't she gone home a while ago? She'd said there was a Buddhist TV show she wanted to watch, then happily left.

"It kept bugging me after we said goodbye. I got on the bus, but then got off after two stops and came back here. It felt like there was something you were going to say to me."

"What about your show?"

Touko looked at her watch and saw it was 2:05. There was no way Noriko could make it in time now.

"Don't worry about it. It's just TV."

Noriko said crisply.

"Talking to you is much more important."

Touko timidly touched her smiling friend's hand.

"Noriko ... "

"Huh?"

"Noriko! Noriko! Noriko! Noriko!"

As she repeatedly called her name, Touko grasped Noriko's hand tightly. After confirming it wasn't an illusion, the tears of relief came flooding out.

"Wh-what happened to you?"

Noriko was bewildered.

From her point of view, all she'd done was call out to her friend who was crouched in the courtyard and apparently talking to herself. So she would have had no idea why Touko was crying.

Touko thanked Maria-sama for bringing Noriko back to her.

"Geez, Touko."

Astonishingly, Noriko squeezed back on Touko's hand. Touko redoubled her grip.

Indeed, she couldn't let go of that hand.

Noriko was hope.

As long as that hand was there, she could crawl her way back from the depths of despair.

She could still believe.

The cold wind whistled.

It would be okay.

She might still be able to fix things.

Yeah, that was it.

As she accepted the help of her friend and stood up, the soft sound of rustling came from within Touko's right pocket.

Afterword

Wah, wah, wah.

What should I do, now I've done it?

Hello, this is Konno.

You often read, "The character just wrote themselves" in other afterwords.

"The character wrote themselves, and as the author I just had to hold on."

– Something like that.

That does occasionally happen to me too, but typically that sort of thing doesn't happen walking down the story's main street, it's one of the characters in the side-alleys, so it doesn't really have much of an impact on the overall story.

But this time they really did write themselves. Well, to be precise, she would suggest things like, "How about I act like this here. What do you think?" and I'd agree, "Ah, that sounds good." (Feel free to call this a wild delusion.)

Oh no. It's not connected to what I thought I'd write in the next story, and the one after!

Wah, wah, wah. What should I do, and so on.

Well, that includes short stories too. I think when a character writes themselves, it's because that's the most natural course of action for them. Right, Noriko?

Setting aside that glimpse backstage, let's discuss "Maria-sama ga Miteru: Big Door, Small Key."

Readers that are reading this after the novel may be thinking "Huh?" because

there's something different about this volume.

What is it that's different? None of the stories are told from Yumi's point-of-view.

Up to now, we've seen Noriko's point-of-view, Shimako's point-of-view, Yoshino's point-of-view, Rei's point-of-view, Sachiko's point-of-view, the graduated onee-sama's points-of-view, and others, but I don't think there's been a volume of "Maria-sama ga Miteru" that hasn't had at least one story with Yumi as the main character (excluding the Premium Book and Illustration Collection).

In exchange, about half of this volume is told from Touko's point-of-view, which we haven't seen much of before (except in small parts like Joanna).

I'm sure the back cover and advertising for this volume will probably have "Touko's secret!" As for what the secret is, read the main story and enjoy (although saying "enjoy" feels a bit awkward).

*

The food and drink that appear in this volume didn't make me feel all that envious, either writing about them or reading about them. Especially Kashiwagi Suguru's souvenir. I hate feeling like I've been tricked.

Occasionally, I find myself craving cola. It's like I'm after the "beer after work" feeling, although I'm not a regular drinker so I don't really know what that's like. But, like beer, it's not the sort of drink that's there when I open the refrigerator (although I'm sure there's some households that would always have cola), so typically I'll just trick myself with cool tea, thinking "If only there was a convenience store right outside our house." Naturally, our refrigerator doesn't have beer either.

Right, right. Be careful, because drinking too many carbonated drinks can be dangerous (too much of anything is not good). About ten years ago, I got soda-addiction and ruined my health. What sort of symptoms did I have? If I didn't have soda, I'd start feeling withdrawal symptoms, and I didn't want to drink anything other than soda. My stomach would hurt, but I still kept craving those

sweet fizzy drinks. I'd get on my bike to go to the corner store to buy them. Soon I'd be back in soda hell. Getting free was tough. Hearing that story, most people's first thoughts are, "... That's scary," followed by, "That doesn't sound like you, Konno," finally leading to the question, "So, did that make you put on weight? Lose weight?" I mean, come on, the point wasn't whether I lost weight or not. My life was in danger –

*

On to my illustrator, Hibiki Reine-san.

As everyone already knows, Hibiki-san has been drawing wonderful covers and insert illustrations ever since the first volume of Maria-sama ga Miteru (which I'm told fans call "Untitled"). For the last couple of years, she's been doing autograph sessions with me, for which I am eternally grateful.

There's a lot of autograph sessions out in the countryside, and when we're traveling there we'll always sit next to each other and chat away like a pair of schoolgirls. Whether it be in a plane, on the bullet train, or in a taxi. About the only time we're quiet is when one of us is sleeping. The editor from Cobalt publishing who travels with us doesn't say anything, but I'm sure they're thinking, "Won't they ever run out of things to talk about?"

I think a large part of why we can continuously chatter is because of Hibiki-san's sociable personality, but part of it is that she and I have widely diverging topics we can talk about. As a result, Hibiki-san has introduced me to a lot of interesting manga, as well as showing me pictures of cute cats.

On a recent trip, Hibiki-san let me play a game on her handheld game console, and it was so much fun that when I got home I bought the complete set (hardware and software) from a big camera store.

Now, even with this good a relationship, there were a couple of matters left outstanding for many years.

I think it was Hibiki-san that noticed it first.

"I don't have a book signed by you, Konno-san ... !"

Despite all the autograph sessions we'd attended together, despite the hundreds of books we'd signed together, we didn't have a single one with the other's autograph. But the idea of the author and illustrator lining up at the register to purchase a number of "Maria-sama ga Miteru" books (whatever they were selling!) was just too foolish so we gave up on it.

"Then, next time (we'll bring along some books)."

We said this when we parted, but then the next couple of times we both completely forgot until we saw each other and said, "Ah." But then last summer, we finally stopped the string of "Ah."

At the "Lillian's Midsummer Festival" anime event we lined up two copies of the latest book, "Illustration Collection," signed them both, and each took a copy home (finally!). The paper in the "Illustration Collection" is glossy, so our signatures were a bit different to normal (and probably not all that good), but these are the only two books in the world with both our signatures that have never been opened at an autograph session.

Then, this summer, there was another advancement in our relationship. We exchanged email addresses.

"Huh – after all this time?"

Ah, what a joke, so funny. But it's true. Despite being such good friends, the opportunity hadn't arisen, so both of us had been too naive to ask, "Can you tell me your email address?" Whenever we had to meet for work, it would go through the Cobalt editorial department, so we were never inconvenienced by it. But then a friend I knew through the anime said to me, "I'd really like to get in touch with Hibiki-san, but ... " so I acted as an intermediary between them and became Hibiki-san's email-friend too.

So with that, I was going to get Hibiki-san to write some of the afterword too, and even got agreement beforehand.

– But, wouldn't you know it, she didn't think she'd be able to fill two and a half pages :)

Konno Oyuki.

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Touko's referencing her performance from the Christmas Eve party, where she played the role of Sara Crewe from *A Little Princess*.